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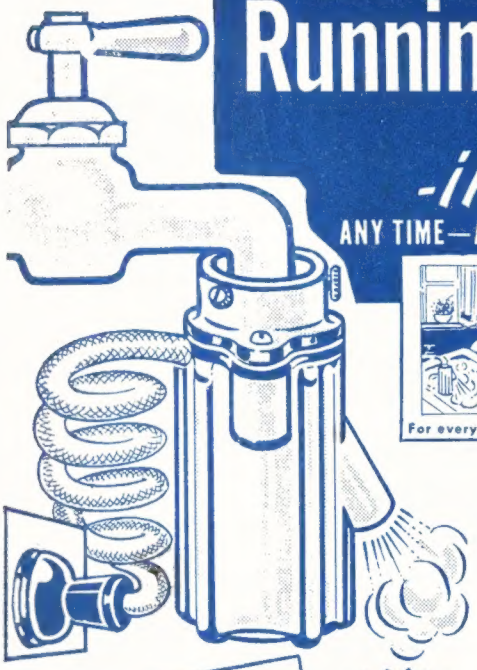

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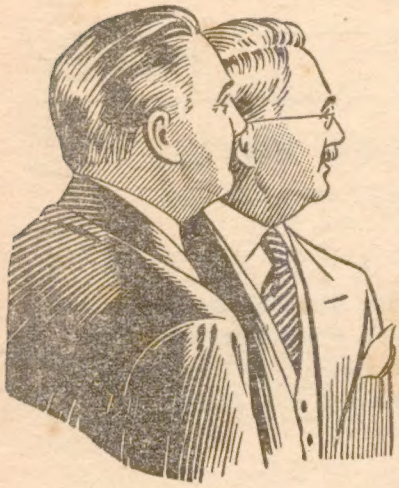

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

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Volume 14 **May, 1948** **Number 5**

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

RAWHIDE SUMMONS ..... **By Brett Austin** 6

After the bleak bitterness of the Black Hills, the island of San Juanita was beautiful to Sam Blanding; but there was no peace here. And the summons from his father's old friend which had brought him here, was a summons to bitter, life-and-death struggle with men who backed their greed with guns!

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"Pat Moran — Railroad Section Boss"

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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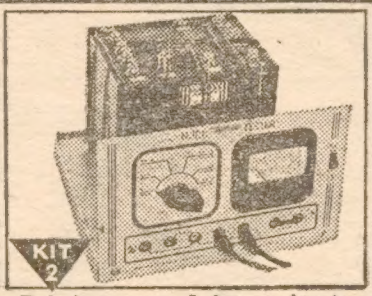

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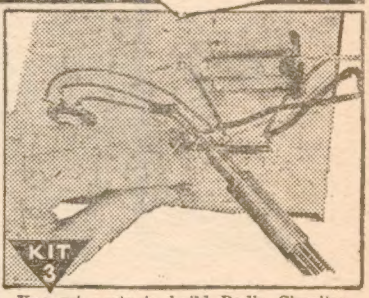

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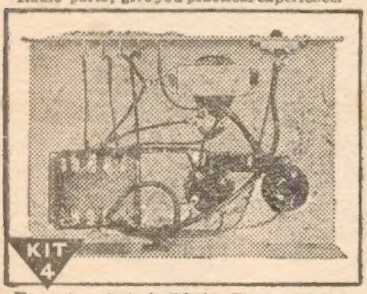

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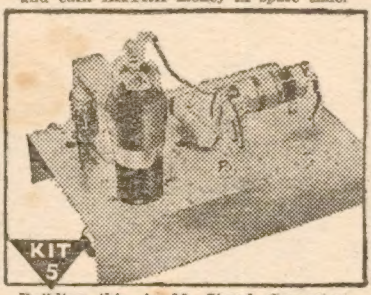

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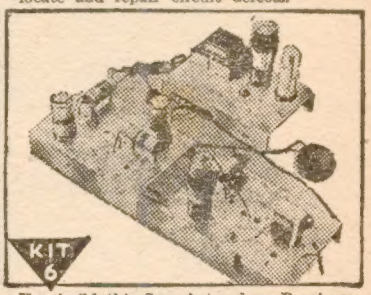

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Out of the past came Rawhide Hinton's cry of help to Sam Blanding, and Sam knew there was nothing for him on the range where poverty and overwork had killed his father!

Complete Book-Length Novel

First Magazine Publication

Rawhide Summons

By Brett Austin

Rawhide's mount had tripped headlong over a wire . . .

1

THE TRIP by Concord across the plains and into the high Rockies had been cold and tiresome, with the first snow of winter on the high country. The Utah desert had been touched with snow; the white substance gathered behind scraggly desert shrubs, driven by the high, hard wind. Sam Blanding was tired; sometimes he wondered if he should have gone West. He was a saddle-man, without a horse at the moment, riding in a swaying, lurching stagecoach. And he didn't like it.

But each mile, especially after crossing the California border, brought a renewed interest to the big, twenty-four-year old cowpuncher. Between Barstow to Santa Ynez the complexion of the country changed and there was rain. The grass was turning green, and Sam remembered with a wry smile that back home in the Black Hills snow would be piled deep behind boulders and over the sagebrush. They came into Santa Ynez in a thick rainstorm; and the next morning, walking into the clear sun, he went to the livery-barn, where he bought a sorrel bronc with good bottom and long leg. There was no stage running south to Santa Barbara and Buenaventura that day, although one would go in three days. And Sam needed a bronc anyway, he figured.

He knew very little Spanish and he had a hard time wrangling with the old horsetrader; the old native looked at Sam's currency with apparent reluctance. That morning at breakfast Sam had noticed that the money collected by the waitress had consisted mostly of California pesos with a scattering of American money. But he also noticed, as he walked into the town plaza, that the Stars and Stripes waved in the wind from the flagpole, with the Great Bear Flag of California under it. Evidently some of these smaller towns clung to old Mexican coins and customs.

"You *Americano?*" the old man asked.

Sam had nodded and said, "Wyoming." Old Rawhide Hinton had told him there was trouble here, and it was best to stretch the truth a point or two. There was no use denying his plains habitat..it showed in his wide Stetson, in the heavy flannel shirt that hung across his thick shoulders, the dark woollen pants with the silver buckle of the belt almost covered by the thickness of his leather gunharness, in the black-handled Colts .45 that sat flatly in the polished holster.

"Wyoming..where is that?"

Sam jerked a thumb toward the east. Evidently the old man had no idea of Wyoming's geographical situation on the map, a thing he had noted about the Californios he had met so far.

"You go south?"

"North," lied Sam. He regarded the *viejo* steadily. "You ask lots of questions, Old Man. Is it information you want?"

"You have nothing I want to know."

Sam Blanding got a bill-of-sale for the sorrel and stepped into his saddle, the Mikes City kak he had carried all that distance. Behind him, he had tied his war-bag, and he had a rifle stuck in his saddle-boot.

THE SUN was warm and bright, although the wind was a little chilly, coming down as it did from the Sierra Madres. And again he thought of the cold, snow-covered range he had left. Old Rawhide Hinton had been right. Sam remembered clearly that night four years before when Rawhide had sat in the warm kitchen of the ranch house of Sam's father, Mike Blanding.

"Hell, Mike, this is no country for raisin' cattle. Lots of feed in the summer, sure, but how about the winter? You feed them for almost six months to fight against cold and starvation."

Mike Blanding had shaken his head. "You'll look aroun', Rawhide, but you'll be back. You'll be back, I'll say."

Rawhide Hinton had reloaded his pipe; his grizzled eyes were hidden by smoke and his thoughts. "No, Mike, you're wrong. I love this country, but I'm through here. I got mor'gaged to the hilt that hard winter two years ago. I'm sixty odd years old, an' I can't go on keepin' the bankers

any longer. I'll never get my ranch clear again. Now let the bankers take it over..hope they have better luck pullin' cows through this hard winter than I've had. T'hell with them, Mike."

Young Sam Blanding had listened with a graveness far beyond his twenty years. He knew the old cowman was right, but he was silent. His dad's spread, the Heart Bar Six, was loaded to the breaking point with money borrowed from the Belle Fourche Bank during the terrible winter of 1886-87, and Sam figured they could never pay it back. For two years he and his father had labored hard in saddle and with rope and had made only enough money to pay the usurious interest due on the notes. And he knew inside of him that his father realized they were bucking a cold deck, too. Moreover, Mike Blanding was dying ..dying slowly, dying day by day.

Now he was confined to the house, a lobo wolf yearning for the trail, yet held within bounds by illness and his feeble body. And old Rawhide Hinton, when he had left the next morning, had openly hugged the bony frame of the once powerful Mike Blanding, tears in his weather-worn eyes.

"*Adios*, Mike, *amigo.*"

"Write to me, Rawhide."

"That I will, Mike, me bucko. That I will. And you get well, *amigo*, an' ride with me, on this range I am going to find."

"So you're going west, huh, Rawhide?"

Old Rawhide had lowered his head against his horse's mane. For a long moment he stood there; he lifted his wrinkled head, tears openly in his eyes again. "Yeah, Sam, headin' west. They druv us out of Texas twenty odd years back....druv out me an' Mike Blanding. Now they got us busted on this grass, too. A different kind of carpetbagger, that's all. What did the doc say about ol' Mike yesterday?"

Sam shook his head slowly. "He hasn't got long. Doc tol' me that on the quiet. Not a year even, he said."

"Can't be cured?"

"Doc don't even know what it is. But somethin's pullin' him down, an' Doc says he's goin' fast."

Old Rawhide's bony right fist twisted the black mane of the big roan gelding. "I feel like I'm runnin' out on him, Sam. By hell, I do, kid. But what can I do? Oh, what could I do?"

OLD RAWHIDE had looked out across the prairie until it lifted and became the rough Black Hills. He was going west, he'd said; going into Montana. But he didn't expect to find any open range there. The Sioux were on reservations, so were the Blackfeet and the Crows, but Montana grass was already claimed by big cow outfits. He'd cross the Rockies into Oregon.

So he had ridden west, the wind sharp against him. And Sam Blanding stood in the door of the rambling log barn and watched the oldster ride away. He was thinking that he'd been lucky. He'd had two fathers, one his real parent, another who had adopted him through friendship and loyalty. He had thought that same thing the next spring when he had heard the sky pilot intone a burial service over the grave of Mike Blanding.

During that year, he'd got letters from old Rawhide....brief notes marked by misspelled words, written in a hen scrawl. Montana had had no range; neither had Idaho. Nevada had some open grass, as yet unclaimed by any iron, but the grass was short there and salty, and a cow got poor eating on it. They'd eat the salt grass until they starved to death, was the way the old rawhider had put it.

The next time Rawhide had written, he was in Oregon. But there was no open range there, for barbwire had come in and post holes were being dug by men who, but a few years before, had never known what a post, or a post hole, was. Of course, a man could go into debt, but ....

"So old Mike is dead, huh, Sam? God bless him, boy, he was of the finest..And what about you, Sam? Are you still carryin' the load?"

Sam was running the cow outfit. The first fall, after he'd bought grub for the year, he owed the bank money on the interest, not on the principal. Rawhide had written from Buenaven-

tura, down along the southern coast of California. He'd had some luck and he'd leased half of an island off the coast. The lease, he said, ran fifty years; he was putting cattle on the island. The island was forty miles off the mainland and he'd ship cattle over to Buenaventura by boat and then load them on the Southern Pacific for the eastern markets.

Every month, as steady as a clock, old Rawhide wrote to Sam, telling him how things were going. He'd got hold of some Mexican cattle real cheap, he'd written. They were poor beef stock, being long-legged and wild, but it was the best he could do with what little cash he had on hand; in fact, he had borrowed from the government on low interest rates. But he was getting ahead. So far, he'd had the run of the entire island.. Santa Juanita, the island was called ..but another outfit had bought the other half, and were moving in sheep. Might run a few cattle, he'd heard, but mostly the outfit would run sheep.

Sam knew that sheep and cattle would never mix. They hadn't mixed in Wyoming, or in Arizona; out of the conflict between sheep and cattle had come a fearful number of the West's bloody backgrounds. The next month, Rawhide hadn't written; Sam found himself worried. But he'd had plenty to occupy his time and his thoughts; his calf gather had been poor....a blizzard had come in late May and calves had frozen to death.. and the price of beef was low. He'd ridden into Belle Fourche, tied his bronc in front of the bank, and gone inside the warm office where three men sat in shirt-sleeves, talking and laughing.

Outside, the wind had been raw, cold. It cut through a man's buckskin jacket to the marrow of his bones.

"Take over the place," Sam had said. "I'm done."

They had tried to argue with him, to talk him into staying. He knew why they wanted him on the property, too. He would continue to work it at a loss to himself and a profit to them. And could they hire a ranch foreman and have him pay them for the chance to work hard?

The next morning he'd headed out; the depot agent had stopped him as he rode out of Belle Fourche past the depot. He'd given him the telegram.

Come. Hell's ahead!
Rawhide.

SAM FOUND himself wondering how old Rawhide had managed to get control of one half of Santa Juanita. So he'd got a loan from the government, huh? Well, Teddy Roosevelt might have been instrumental in that.

For Rawhide Hinton and Mike Blanding had fought in the Civil War. Sure, they had been for the South, for Texas men were proud men. But young Teddy Roosevelt, who had been in the Black Hills on a hunting trip, had met the two old-timers; they'd chewed tobacco together and swapped lies and gone with young Teddy on hunting trips. Teddy Roosevelt didn't care what a man's principles were just so he was man enough to stand up on his hind legs and fight for them, right or wrong.

And Teddy admired a war veteran and soldier, whether he fought for the losing side or the winning side. Now Sam had a hunch Teddy Roosevelt had helped old Rawhide. He'd gotten a letter from Teddy Roosevelt when Mike Blanding had died. And the rising young politician and big-game hunter had sympathized with Sam over the loss of his father. He had asked then where and how old Rawhide had been and how his health was.

Sam had written him, telling of the old man's going west. He had given him the last address he had had of old Rawhide, and a return letter from Washington had said that he, Theodore Roosevelt, would get in touch with Rawhide.

The distance to Pachecho Pass was about twenty miles. He ate his noon meal beside a gurgling, laughing creek, he picketed his new horse out in the tall, lush grass, and lay down on his back, pulled his Stetson over his face to ward off the warm sun, and dozed a little. Up the creek his horse could be heard munching on

the grass. He was almost asleep when he heard the horse stop munching.

He sat up quickly.

An old man, leading a mule, was entering the clearing. "*Come esta, hombre?*" he said.

Sam knew this meant, "How are you, my man?" and he said. "Howdy, partner." The old man had two dogs with him, long-legged, scraggly-looking hounds. Sam looked at the curs and wondered why the old man had them. The *viejo* answered that question for him.

"I herd sheep, *senor*. Listen, and the bell of my wether you will hear from up the mountain."

The old man cocked his dark head and listened. Sam listened too; finally he heard the sharp *ting-ting* of the bell.

"Lots of sheep here?" asked Sam.

A wrinkled hand made a gesture. "Not *mucho, senor*. I have just a few head; I am the only one. A few hombres keep them for wool around the haciendas, but since the Yanquis take California, most of the cloth come by boat."

Sam got up and nodded. He moved over and settled down again, this time with his back to the broad trunk of a live-oak tree. He talked with the old man for some minutes, and then brought the talk around to sheep on the islands. His map he had bought in Denver had shown the channel islands off Buenaventura, lying flat and long and parallel to the coast.

"The big men, they move lots of sheep to Santa Juanita, *senor*. There is one hombre over there, and he runs the cattle."

He was hard to understand, talking broken English and once in a while lapsing back into Mexican, but Sam got the essence of his recital, or so he figured. Of course, there would be lots of things he would not clearly understand until Rawhide Hinton told him the complete story.

ARIZONA sheepmen, crowded off grass by a cattle-sheep war, were going into Santa Juanita, leasing half of it from a Spanish don, who still ran a few head of cattle on the island. The old man had seen Rawhide Hinton once or twice, but did not know him personally.

Sam prodded the ancient's failing memory, but the oldster could not remember the names of the Arizona men. One man, he claimed, owned the sheep. He knew the old don, Don Pablo Alvarez.

But Sam got some information. During the days when California was in revolution, Don Pablo Alvarez had helped General Fremont, and, as a reward, had obtained complete possession of the island of Santa Juanita. There, in his island kingdom, he had prospered, running cattle wild and shooting them each fall, selling their hides off the dock at Buenaventura to the clipper ships that would take them to the leather plants in New England, going around the Horn. But with the railroads going across the United States, linking the big manufacturing cities of the east with the cow country of the west, the clipper ships no longer bought hides on the dock. And Don Pablo Alvarez had lost his market.

His cattle, scrawny and wild, had been good only for hides; their meat was of small value, and would not draw much on an open market. He had been forced to sell one half of his island and Rawhide Hinton had borrowed government funds and bought it.

Sam Blanding pieced the rest of it together. Don Pablo Alvarez had finally used up the money he'd got from Rawhide and then had to sell part of the remaining half of the island.

And sheep were booming at the time. Despite his dislike of the silly, blatting creatures, Sam had to admit sheep drew better money than cattle. New England mills were turning to Western wool, now that railroads made shipments East possible; they were slighting wool shipped to the United States. But Sam didn't expect this situation to last long. Sheep were multiplying fast on the eastern slope of the Rockies and in Utah and Nevada, and soon the demand....in a few years, at the most....would be filled.

He said good-bye to the garrulous old man and cleaned his cooking uten-

sils. Thirty minutes later he was on the crest of the pass. Below him the foothills ran down for about four miles and then lost their identity in the Pacific Ocean.

The land below was marked by green grass and brush, and here and there, looking like squares on a giant checkerboard, were groves of lemons and oranges. But neither these, nor the fields of grain and hay, attracted the man from the Black Hills.

For his eyes were on the mighty roll of the Pacific. For the first time in his twenty-four years he was looking at a body of water so big he could not see across it. The blue breakers, visible despite the distance, broke on the sandy ledges of beaches, smashed against yonder clump of igneous rock.

He lifted his gaze, hoping to see the blue outlines of San Miguel, San Clemente, and Santa Juanita islands. But although the afternoon was clear on land, far out on the ocean dwelled a mist that obscured his vision.

Then he looked toward the west, where he saw the pueblo of Santa Barbara, lying in the curl of the land, about ten miles away. He could not see Buenaventura, for a jut of land came out, cutting the town from his view.

He touched his spurs to his bronc, and rode down the trail that led toward the hidden city, there beside the pounding Pacific.

2

ON THE outskirts of the California town he came upon three herders hazing a band of some two hundred sheep toward the docks. They were swarthy, short-legged men, their dark skins bespeaking their Spanish or Basque ancestry. Dogs barked and circled the woollies and the herders waved them directions that only they and their dogs understood.

Sam Blanding drew rein, and let the herd cross the wagon trail. Two buckboards had stopped and the team on one of the rigs caught Sam's eye. They were good-looking horses of a light buckskin color only; instead of having a line-back and a black mane and tail like the buckskins he'd seen, these had flaxen manes and tails. He'd heard of the palomino....the golden horse brought into California by the Conquistadores..but this was the first time he'd seen one.

The rig was a good-looking buckboard, too, with varnished panels that glistened in the sun, with a top made well tanned cowhide. Sam lifted his slow gaze to the rig's occupants.

Three people sat on the leather-upholstered seat. One was a young man of about Sam's age, and he looked at Sam with ill disguised contempt in his dark eyes. He was Spanish, Sam saw, and evidently he didn't like the Americanos, the gringos. Sam smiled a little and looked at the girl in the center.

She was pretty, but not beautiful, although she was appealing enough in her dark, Latin way. The third occupant of the seat was still another girl. Sam directed his glance at her. She was watching him, her red lips open a little, and when Sam caught her eye, her gaze was level for a long moment. Then she looked away.

Sam returned his attention to the sheep, now and then glancing at the second girl. But he never caught her eye on him again. Other rigs were held up by the band of woollies, and behind him he heard a few words in Mexican that sounded decidedly like swearing to him.

"These gringos," one horseman said angrily. "They come into this country and take it over and hold up even the road progress. Do they think they own the country?"

The man talked in broken English. Seeing he was the only gringo around, Sam decided that the man was talking in English for his benefit. He started to turn his bronc around and ride over to the rig, but then changed his mind. No use picking any trouble; from what old Rawhide Hinton had hinted, he'd soon be in trouble enough.

He noticed that the sheep seemed to be all ewes, young stock that would have lambs in a few months, and he noticed that a Big R was painted on each one's back. This was evidently

the brand, or the initial, of the owner. Finally the last one trickled by, a sheepdog nipping him on the hind legs.

"Sic 'em, pooch," Sam said. "Sic 'em!"

He lifted his bronc to a lope, leaving the buckboards behind. He kept thinking of the arrogant youth and the small, dark girl who had looked so flatly at him.

FROM WHERE he stood, Sam could see the sheep going out on the dock, ready to go into a sailboat that stood waiting, sails down in the sharp wind. Evidently the woollies were going over to one of the islands, possibly to Santa Juanita. He tied his horse and went into the cantina, hoping to get some word regarding old Rawhide's whereabouts. Possibly the old cowman might be in Buenaventura.

The bartender knew a little English and Sam knew a few words of Mexican, and together they agreed that maybe old Rawhide was in town, and maybe he wasn't. The man called his son of twelve from the living quarters at the rear of the cantina. The son, who went to the local school, spoke good English. No, he hadn't seen Rawhide Hinton in town for a week or so.

"But it ees a long ways to the island," the father said. "Sometimes the ocean she ees choppy an' hard to cross. An' *Senor* Rawhide he has plenty of work for him at home."

Sam grinned. "Reckon he has, I guess."

He ordered some tequila, for he'd never tasted it, and he liked it. He asked who had owned the sheep he'd encountered on entering Buenaventura. The boy said they belonged to *Senor* Eno Reed, who was on Santa Juanita with *Senor* Rawhide Hinton. Sam remembered the big R painted on them: that stood for Reed, huh? Eno Reed? Well, he'd probably meet Reed later.

He went outside, got his pony, and walked down the street, leading the tired horse toward the livery. The mozo had already unhooked the team from the buckboard and now the palominos were munching mountain hay from the manger. Sam stripped his bronc and hung the kak on a peg in the wall, using the off stirrup as a means to hang the saddle. The mozo looked carefully at the outfit.

"That come from Montana, huh? Once a Montana man he rode through here with saddle look like that. *Mio amigo*, Rawhide Hinton, he ride saddle look like that."

"Rawhide in town?"

"I do not know; I have not seen him. Maybe he is, though. But his horse is over in that stall."

He pointed a gnarled finger toward a big appoloosa gelding. Sam understood. Rawhide didn't take a bronc across from Santa Juanita by boat; he had one all the time in the livery.

He grained the sorrel and went outside. The wind came in, cutting through his heavy clothes, and he glanced down at the dock, some three blocks away. Sheep were moving in on the sailboat. There was another cantina, but Rawhide wasn't there, nor had they seen him. Sam went next to the two hotels, hoping to find him registered there, but neither of the clerks thought he was in town. There would be a fisherman's boat going out at dawn, the last clerk said, and Sam could get passage on that.. yes, they'd take his bronc, too.

DESPITE his anxiousness to see old Rawhide Hinton, Sam realized he would have to spend the night in Buenaventura. He went down to the dock where the last fifty of the sheep were being loaded. Two men were leaning against the rail of the landing, and Sam felt their eyes on him.

One was short, wide-shouldered and tough-looking, with a scraggly short beard that refused to hide his blocky jaw. He wore greasy buckskin trousers, plainly from the Plains section, and he had on a thick mackinaw. Run-over boots encased his wide feet and Sam noticed the Mexican, hand-hammered spurs. He looked like a cowman, so what was he doing around woollies?

A stevedore came up and spoke to the man. From their conversation Sam Blanding found out the man's

name was Nick Blake. Blake and the stevedore went onto the sailboat.

Sam found the other man glancing at him. He was a tall man, thick but not corpulent, and his eyes, blue and sunken, looked at Sam with a sharpness the cowboy did not like. They covered Sam's six-foot frame and lingered on the Colts .45 in the black holster. The man came over and said, "You're new to this range, huh, cowboy?"

"I am."

"I'm Eno Reed," the man said. "And your name?"

Sam regarded him with new curiosity. So this was Eno Reed, the sheepman who was crowding old Rawhide on Santa Juanita? He looked like a cowman, not a sheepherder. For he wore a widebrimmed Dalhart Stetson, a checkered flannel shirt and heavy California pants, and his boots were polished to a glossy blackness.

"You run cattle around here?" asked Sam.

Reed's sunken eyes covered him sharply.

"Sheep," he said. "They pay more, they tell me. Your name is..?"

Again Sam disregarded the question. "Where's your range?"

"I asked you a question stranger."

Sam's grin was easy. "I asked you one, too."

Eno Reed rubbed his blocky jaw. "You on the dodge, cowboy? 'Cause if your are, Santa Juanita is open to you. We could use your gun."

"I hate sheep, Reed."

Reed brought his hand down. "You aim to side old Rawhide Hinton, huh? Well, cowboy, take my advice an' get t'hell outa this range! You got a whole hide, and it might not stay whole if you sign up with old Hinton."

Sam murmured, "Thanks for the advice, follow."

Reed watched him walk off.

WHILE SAM was talking with a cantina owner, the Spanish fellow who had driven the palominos on the buckboard entered. He took a short drink, and left and Sam found out, by a few well placed questions, that he was *Senor* Miguel Alvarez, *hijo* of Don Pablo Alvarez. And the two girls that had been with him? One was his sweetheart, *Senorita* Maria Lopez, and the other was his sister, *Senorita* Esperanz Alvarez. They called her Anza for short, the man further stated, and she was one of the prettiest girls around here, he claimed.

Sam smiled, drank his tequila, and agreed with every word the man had said regarding Anza Alvarez. While they were talking, Eno Reed and Nick Blake came in, cold and chilly from the raw wind.

Blake nodded to Sam with, "Thought you'd drifted by now," and Sam murmured, "Later, maybe."

The two sheepmen went to the bar and ordered whiskey. They took three quick shots, while Blake watched Sam Blanding. Sam knew the man was trying to catalog him, to fit him into that range and the trouble on it, and he felt a wry satisfaction. He went to the hotel and registered and went up to his room, toting his belongings. When he came down, Nick Blake was in the lobby. Blake did not know it, evidently, but Sam had stood at the foot of the stairs, unnoticed by the sheepman who had pulled his finger down the names written on the register, stopping his blunt forefinger opposite Sam's name.

Sam asked, "Find what you want, Blake?"

The man studied him coldly. "What do you mean stranger?"

"Sam Blanding is the name."

Blake shrugged. "You lookin' for trouble?"

Sam said quietly, "I ain't likin' people who come in behin' me an' check on me, Blake. You get that, don't you?"

Blake was silent, his eyes pondering. Sam looked hard at him, switched his gaze to the dead-pan clerk, then back to the sheepman. Blake shrugged and said, "You jump like a grasshopper, Blanding. You jump at conclusions."

Sam Blanding went out into the night. Well, they knew who he was, anyway.

The night was dark, and the wind had died. From the beach could be heard the sob of the breakers as they smashed into the sandy shore. Last

night the moon had come up around ten o'clock, Sam knew, for he had watched it from the window of his hotel in Santa Ynez. But he wouldn't be up at ten tonight; he was tired and hungry for a good bed.

But first, the horseman all the time, he had to check on his sorrel. A flickering lantern lighted by whale-oil hung from a beam in the barn. The sorrel nickered and nibbled his sleeve, and Sam said, "You ol' rascal, you've been used to eatin' sugar, huh? Well, come mornin' you'll get some."

He was currying down the sorrel when a slim, dark man entered. He came down the walk between the two sets of stalls and stopped and watched Sam Blanding work with the curry-comb.

"*Como esta, senor?*" the man said.

The man talked broken English. The *Senor* Reed, he said, had asked him to check on the ownership of the Americano's sorrel horse. He had once had a sorrel horse like that, and it had been stolen from him. Did Sam have a bill-of-sale for the bronc?

"So he's tryin' to accuse me of horse 'stealin', huh?"

Sam showed the marshal the bill-of-sale he'd gotten on the sorrel. The man examined it under the lantern's light and handed it back. Si, it was good, he figured. He was sorry.

"And you are Senor Sam Blanding?"

Sam had other identification on him and he showed it to the marshal. The man seemed satisfied. He talked for a little while, then went outside, and Sam continued currying the sorrel.

One thing was certain now. Eno Reed and Nick Blake had recognized his name, and they'd sent the marshal to check up on him to see if he really was Sam Blanding. Sam knew now that every minute he spent in Buenaentura would be a dangerous minute.

He decided to go out the back door, head for his room, and stay close to it until dawn. The darkness was an ally to anybody who wanted to run against him. A gun came down and smashed against his temple as he walked out the back door.

The blow sickened him, driving him to his knees. But even as he went down, Sam was pulling his Colts. He perceived a confused blur of a man in the dark, heard a guttural grunt. Again something smashed across his head. Dimly he heard the roar of his own gun as his thumb dropped the hammer.

WHEN HE came to, he was in in the lobby of the hotel. He was sitting in a chair and water was running across his face. He brushed it off. The lamplight, for some reason, hurt his eyes.

The clerk, he saw, held a pail of cold water, and Anza Alverez was using a wet cloth on his forehead. He pushed her hand back.

"What happened?"

Anza Alverez said, "We found you in the alley. The clerk heard your gun talk, and he and the marshal and I went out there. Somebody had slugged you, we think."

Sam wiped his forehead with a rough woollen towel. He handed it back to the clerk. He looked at the third person, the marshal.

"Who sent you in to get my identity, Marshal? Who told you to find out who I was?"

The man appeared not to understand, and Anza Alverez spoke in rapid Spanish. The marshal said, "*Senor* Eno Reed, *senor.*"

"Was Nick Blake with him?"

"No, *senor.*"

Sam nodded. He looked at Anza Alverez and liked what he saw, and his slow grin showed his thoughts. He got out his wallet and counted his slim bills, and found out he still had his forty dollars.

The set-up was clear now; and he found himself wondering where the marshal stood. Reed, sure of his identity, had staked out Nick Blake to slug him; his pistol shot, wild as it was, had called the girl and clerk to his aid, and thereby had probably saved his life.

"Who did this to you?" Anza Alvarez wanted to know.

Sam put his wallet back into his pocket. "Nobody wanted to rob me, or I wouldn't have any dinero now. You ask who did this to me? Nick Blake did it, *senorita.*"

"But why? You are a stranger, no?"

"My name," said Sam, "is Sam

Blanding. Does that mean anything to you?"

Her face showed it did. "*Senor* Rawhide, he has spoken often of you. Word has got around that he has sent for you. You are riding into trouble, *senor.*"

Sam smiled a little. "My achin' head tells me just that," he agreed.

3

SAM BLANDING was pulling off his boots when a man knocked on the door. Sam told him to come in and the marshal entered, hat in hand. "I have been looking for the *Senores* Reed and Blake, *Senor* Blanding. They have left town; they went out with their load of sheep for Santa Juanita."

Sam nodded.

The man was thick with apologies. "I am indeed sorry if they 'worked me,' like you say. I have been marshal here for almost twenty *anos,* and I do my best at all times."

"Forget it," grinned Sam.

Still murmuring apologies, the marshal left, a man slightly befuddled, it seemed, by the night's mysterious doings and his unwitting part in them. Before hitting the sougans, Sam jacked the back of a chair under the doorknob, after locking the door and leaving the key in the lock. The room had one window, and that looked down two stories to the main street.

Sleep was slow in coming. Before dawn, Sam was up and in a cafe, eating breakfast that consisted of fried wild goat meat, evidently preserved in a salty brine, for it still held a taste of salt. It was good, though, and so were his wheatcakes.

This was the cafe where the fishermen ate, so he was told, and they came in soon, joking and laughing. They were a lot of mixed nationalities: Sam picked some to be Portuguese, others were Mexican, and one looked like a Swede, and spoke with a Swede's heavy accent. The cafe owner pointed him out as the captain of the fishing boat.

He listened to Sam express his desire to reach Santa Juanita. No, they were going north of Santa Juanita, to San Miguel island, where they would catch sardines off the shoals. San Miguel was ten miles..no, about twenty, north of Santa Juanita, the man said.

Sam asked, "Is there another boat going out there?"

The man considered, his Nordic face bleak. No, no other. Sam tried to talk him into going off his route, but the man said, "No, I'll not deliver a gunhand for that damn' dog, Eno Reed. You're workin' for a poor man, fella."

Sam smiled. "I'm going over to help my old friend, Rawhide Hinton. Hell, you got me wrong..I'm not a Reed gunhand. Sheep stench piles up in my nostrils, Captain."

The man eyed him dubiously. "Ol' Rawhide hirin' you?"

Sam told him that he and Rawhide had been friends for years, so long that he himself could not remember when Rawhide had first met him.. for he'd been a day or so old in his crib in Texas. The Swede thawed at this news and shook hands, saying his name was Gunnar Swanson. Sure, he'd take Sam to old Rawhide; he'd be plumb glad to go out of his way to help the oldster.

SAM HAD decided to leave his sorrel in the livery barn in the stall beside old Rawhide's town horse; but he carried his kak and Navajo saddle blanket, silver-inlaid headstall, silver-plated curb bit, and his bedroll when, some minutes later, he walked the swaying gangplank into the fishing boat.

The sharp odor of fish came to his nostrils. The wind was blowing a little, so he got on the other side of the deck where the stench would not reach him. Crew members either loafed or mended nets and four were playing cards in the shelter of a bunch of oak barrels.

Sam had never been on a boat before. The wind was from the right direction to fill the sails, sending the craft toward Santa Juanita island. About five miles out two things happened to Sam Blanding: he saw the outlines of the craggy island ahead of

them, rising out of the blue sea; and he got seasick.

He blamed some of it on the blow on the head he'd taken the night before. Even now his head was sore and swollen where the gun had smashed down.

"Hit the rail, cowboy," laughed Gunnar Swanson.

When he came back from the rail, the odor of the fish came with the wind, stinging his nostrils. Evidently none of the crew was bothered by the sea or the odor, for things went on at the same pace..a few men mending nets, needles bright in the sun, a few loafing on the deck, dozing on blankets, and the same noise and conviviality from the card players. Sam wondered how long it would take him to get over being seasick, and Gunnar Swanson showed his white teeth in a wide smile.

"Me, I never have got over it, Blanding. When the sea is rough, I still get sick..an' damn' sick, too."

"This sea is rough, huh?"

"This sea is calm."

Sam grimaced and made another trip to the rail. He came back and said, "I'd hate to see it when it's rough. When we gettin' to Santa Juanita, Captain?"

"Come with me, Blanding."

GUNNAR SWANSON took him to where they had an unobstructed view ahead. He pointed out San Miguel island, blue in the distance, and he also pointed out San Clemente and Santa Barbara islands. He gave Sam the distances between each group. Two sail ships, big and heavy, buffeted by the waves and the wind, showed up and passed them. Gunnar Swanson spoke to his chief fisherman.

"Prob'ly a storm at Point Conception, Henry. The wind has driven them big lumber boats into the channel. Maybe we'd better fish on this side of Santa Juanita, in the sand bars, 'cause I figure the wind an' storm out in the channel has drove the sardines in, huh?"

Sam found himself wondering how the wind could affect a sardine, then remembered that the only sardines he'd even seen had been in cans, not swimming around. They could have their fish; he'd stick with cows. He was mighty glad when, an hour later, the ship pulled into a cove, silent and glistening under the sun, protected from the wind. Here a dock, made of piling driven out on the beach into the water, extended out about seventy-five feet, a dark finger marring the blue of the water.

Gunnar Swanson told him, "This is where you get off, Sam." Then to a deckhand, "Tie hard to that pile, Shorty."

Sam looked at the rocky ledge of hills behind the dock. It was a rough country, no two ways about that. The skyline was rough and jagged. But the mountainous island was green with grass and live-oaks. To their south a little stream ran down into the ocean, and Sam figured there was plenty of fresh water for stock back in the hills. All in all, it looked like good cow country to him.

Sam reached the dock; the planks were rough under his boots. He thanked Gunnar Swanson and tried to pay him, but the Swede would take no payment. The deckhand pulled in the mooring rope, and the boat moved out of the bay, heading around the sandy hook. Sam went to the small building at the end of the dock. It was empty but unlocked.

Gunnar Swanson had told him about the flags and the rope whereby the flags were run up to the top of the high pine, way up there on yonder ridge. A red flag, he said, meant that a boat should stop at the dock, while a blue one meant that somebody waited who wanted to see old Rawhide Hinton. Sam found a yellow flag there, too; that was for the Alvarez family, Gunnar had said. Rawhide used the blue flag and the Alvarez used the yellow flag. They both used the same dock but, according to the fish captain, Eno Reed had a dock of his own, up a few miles.

Sam ran the blue flag up, pulling on the spotcord rope until the flag fluttered in the wind on top of the pine. He was getting his land legs

back again and his head was steadying, although sometimes it felt like the land was pitching under him. He went outside and looked up at the plateau where Swanson had said Rawhide had his hacienda. A trail ran along the hill, took a bend and then disappeared.

The hacienda—the word, Swanson told him, was the common one for "ranchhouse"—was out of sight from where Sam stood, although, he had glimpsed it from the boat. Sam squatted in the warm sunlight and waited, his kak and rig on the ground beside him. Thirty odd minutes later, according to his Ingersoll watch, a rider came down the trail, leading an unsaddled bronc.

SAM HAD hoped the rider would be old Rawhide, but when the man got within range he saw he was a Mexican, a short, thin man with long mustaches. He wore mocassins and rode a flat-big-horn saddle on a pinto pony, and he led a long-legged roan gelding. He looked at Sam with shrewd eyes.

"Who you?"

Sam grinned at the man's wariness. "I could ask you the same," he drawled. "Where's Rawhide Hinton?"

"Him hurt. He in the hacienda. Who you?"

"Sam Blanding, from the Black Hills."

The man came off the pinto and shook hands. He had a strong, wiry grip; a smile curled his dark mouth. "Welcome, *senor*, to the *rancho* of Rawhide Hinton. Me, I am Jose Martinez, the segundo under *Senor* Rawhide."

"Rawhide is hurt, huh? What happened?"

"His *caballo*, he fall with him. Come, saddle this horse. Here, I saddle him."

Martinez slapped down the blanket, smoothed out the wrinkles, took Sam's saddle, lowered it and cinched it into place. "The *caballo*, he does not buck, *senor*. But hurry; Rawhide waits for you."

"He hurt bad?"

Martinez had the Latin sense of timing. He rubbed his jaw and said slowly, "Not too bad. His knee, he is lame under him."

Sam pulled down the flag, hung it on the hook inside the cabin then got his stirrup and went up. The roan pranced a little, but the man from South Dakota took his fight out with his spurs. They started up the trail that had been carved out of the hill, running along the rim of it until it reached the high mesa above. It was a wagon trail, so the two rode side by side, instead of one behind the other.

Sam liked the feel of a set of stirrups much better than the feel of a swaying deck under his boots, and his head, despite the trip across the water, despite the clout given him down in Buenaventura, was clearing and he felt more like his own self. In fact, he found himself thinking of Anza Alvarez.

"The Alvarez hacienda? *Si*, it is over there, Senor Sam." Martinez's rope-calloused fingers waved toward the north. "Their hacienda is between the *rancho* of *Senor* Rawhide and that of Eno Reed. You cannot see it, for it is behind the mountain that juts out like a hump on a poor man's back."

Their ponies toiled up the grade, the incline slowing them to a walk. Sam found himself listening to Rawhide's foreman talk: Martinez, it seemed had worked with Rawhide up in Oregon, when the oldster had ramrodded the N Bar N for a spell and he'd come to California with the old rider. They came upon some steers grazing in some manzanita. They were wild and they turned and ran, but not before Sam read the big brand on the ribs: RB.

"The B, *Senor* Sam, is for Blanding. Always did Rawhide figure you would come with him and be his partner at this *rancho* of Santa Juanita."

Sam hid his emotions with a smile. He glanced back down the road and saw a sailboat pull in on the dock below.

"That boat belongs to the Alvarez hacienda. They saved that when the *senor* was forced to sell his land. They leave it at the dock. *Senor* Alvarez, you will like him; he is a great, good man. The girl, that Anza—ah, she is beauty! But the boy, that Miguel...." Martinez's words died in a shrug.

Sam told about seeing the brother and sister, and Maria Lopez, coming into Buenaventura in a buckboard, coming from the direction of Santa Barbara.

"*Si*, they go there and shop and see friends about once a month. That Maria Lopez, I wonder if she is good for young Miguel?"

"How would I know?"

Martinez rode in silence. Sam, twisted in the saddle, watched the sailboat drop sail and lie at the mooring piling. Soon the rig and the horses came off it, and took the trail up the hill.

"They take their team an' buggy with them," muttered Sam. "I wonder if a bronc gets seasick?"

Martinez shrugged.

THEY REACHED the top of the grade. There the road forked, one branch running south to Rawhide's hacienda, the other turning north to the hacienda of the Alvarez family. On the level ground, they gave their ponies spurs, and loped through the live-oak groves and clusters of manzanita and chamiso. Once a wild hog ran across the road, tusks gleaming in the bright sunlight and they saw three head of deer grazing in a meadow. They saw more cattle, too, and Sam liked the looks of the mountain stock.

They thundered across a wooden bridge that spanned a noisy little stream bordered by rushes and cattails, and Sam caught the clean odor of running water. They slanted around a bend, Sam on the inside, and ahead, appearing as though by magic, was the hacienda of Rawhide Hinton.

The outfit was much as Sam had expected. Against yonder mountain lay the house, a one-story, rambling affair solidly constructed of adobe with shake roofs, the corrals made of straight mountain pine, from which the bark had been peeled so that it shone in the sunlight.

Other buildings, among them a smoke house for meat, a blacksmith shop and two bunkhouses, were placed in various spots. A collie dog barked as they came in and from somewhere, behind some building, came a chorus of barking, evidently from dogs penned in. Sam looked inquiringly at Martinez.

"Those dogs, the *perros?* They are cattle dogs, used to chase the wild cows from the thick brush. We use them during roundup, and that starts in a week or so. Even now the hands are getting ready."

Saddle horses circled one corral for cowpunchers were working them with ropes. A forge was working ourside the corral and two men were shoeing broncs caught by the others. Hoofs grinding on gravel, they skirted the coral and rode to the house, where they went down.

"*Senor* Rawhide," called Martinez. "Sam Blanding, he is home, *senor!*"

"Come on in, Sam!"

The old bellow, so long unheard, was music in Sam's ears. He crossed the patio, spur rowels chiming, and a squaw opened the door. Sunlight streamed through the big windows and fell across old Rawhide, seated in a big chair.

For a moment, heart pounding, Sam stood there, silent, watching the man who sat in the chair, marking the passage of time against his form and features. Rawhide, he thought, had aged terribly.

The thick mane of hair, gray when he'd left the Black Hills, was now even grayer, and it had thinned. The face, thought, was much the same, tough and showing courage, although the lines had grown deeper. Now the thin lips were trembling with emotion.

"Don't stand there, Sam. Let me get hold of you, son."

Sam crossed the room, and in a second he had the oldster out of the

chair, hugging him. Rawhide had lost some weight, but the muscles of the old saddleman were still tough under Sam's grip.

"Kid, it's good to see you. Thank gawd you're here! I thought that maybe I'd die, and never see old Mike's boy again!"

4

NICK BLAKE came into the room. He said, "What did you find out, Eno?"

Reed sat on a homemade chair, his legs out in front of him. They were in a room behind a cantina and from the front part of the saloon came the sounds of men drinking and shouting; the din drifted through the thick door made of native oak. Reed scowled and lifted his sunken, lifeless eyes.

"He's Sam Blanding, sure enough. You sure muffed that sluggin' you did on his head, friend!"

Blake's smile was thin under his beard. "He's too fast with a gun for me," he admitted. "I wonder if he saw it was me that slugged him?"

"How could he? The night was dark as ink, Blake."

Blake considered that, rubbing his beard with the flat of his palm. "Hope you're right, Eno. Otherwise, there'll be fireworks when me an' that bucko meet for the next time. So the girl an' clerk got him into the hotel, huh?"

"He's down there now."

Blake walked to the window, slow with thought; he pulled the thick satin shade lower, an involuntary gesture that brought a smile to Eno Reed, still in his chair. Blake turned and looked at his boss.

"The whole thing is changed, now, Eno. With Blanding helping old Rawhide, there's a different set-up on Santa Juanita island. We got somebody to buck now—somebody who can fight back—we ain't battlin' with an ol' rawhider now."

"Competition, they tell me, is a good thing, *amigo*."

Blake smiled slowly. "Maybe some kind is, but I don't figure this kind is good. My pistol came down fast, but Sam Blanding got his gun out anyway—he even got in a wild shot. If it hadn't been for that shot callin' for help, I'da clubbed him to death, back there in that alley!"

His tone was bestial. The savagery of it made Eno Reed look at him suddenly. "You're a killer—when you want to be," the sheepman said. He got to his feet slowly, pushing his weight up out of the chair. "Well, the sea is rough, an' it's waitin' for us. We better get down to the dock, for them sheep are tied down in the hold by now."

"Sheep," growled Blake. "They stink. I don't like them."

"You like the dinero they bring in," Eno Reed reminded him. "A man can stand a little smell of sheep manure when his pockets are lined with gold. Don't take it so serious, Nick. There'll be dark nights ahead, an' we'll run Rawhide Hinton's RB cattle down many a gangplank into a ship. Santa Juanita island is over forty miles long, and one man and a crew can't ride it night and day. Always remember that, *amigo*."

Eno Reed pulled his sheepskin windbreaker over his thick shoulders. He looked at his foreman with a slow, lazy gaze. "Anything else botherin' you this wild night, Nick?"

"That kid," growled Blake. "I don't know how far we can trust him, Reed. There's a million questions a man could ask about him to make him doubt him. What if he got yellow feet an' squealed to the law? What if ol' man found out he was in cahoots with us? The ol' don would kill him, I'd say. Even if he is his own flesh an' blood, ol' Don Pablo would kill him. He's that proud of his blood, he is."

"You read too many dime novels."

"By hades, it's true, ain't it?"

"Don't talk so loud." Reed went to the front door, jerked it open, and looked out into the cantina. Tobacco smoke swirled over gambling tables and over the long bar, but the short

hallway was empty. Reed looked at the fishermen and cow punchers and sheepherders for some moments, his eyes heavy and unreadable. He shut the door, buttoned the top button on his windbreaker, and went out the back door.

THEY WALKED down the alley, two men silent with thoughts, and they reached the main street. They went down this; the wind pushed against them, laden with a little mist from the ocean that swelled and groaned at the base of the pier as they went out on it, boots sounding on the water-washed planks of the dock. Once Nick Blake stumbled his sharp boot heel going into a wide crack, and he cursed in Mexican. The words were a dull monotone, lost against the wind and the night.

Reed said, "You swear a lot, friend. Maybe some day you'll meet your Maker. Can't tell, friend—maybe there is a Hereafter, much as a sensible man would doubt it."

Blake growled, "Listen to him," and looked at the wild night around them. "Listen to him, wind. He's goin' into his pulpit. You don't hire my tongue, Reed, you hire my time, an' my gun. Don't ever forget that."

Reed shrugged, faintly amused. "Have it your way, Nick."

They came to the end of the dock, and now the wind had another sound—that of whistling through spars. The dim, flickering light of a lantern showed them the gangplank to the sailboat, and they went down this. Now a man moved out of the shadows, coming from the direction of the cabin.

"This way, hombres. Into the cabin you go, and it is warm there."

He was a swarthy man who rolled as he walked, fitting his gait to the rise and fall of the hard wood under him. He had known many seas and many ships and many men, and many ports had known him—this was apparent in the leathery, wrinkled face that the lamplight showed. He came in behind them and closed the door, shutting the wind outside.

Reed took a seat on the long bench and Nick Blake took a chair opposite him. Reed said, "It doesn't roll much, Malone. Those sheep are heavy."

"Low tide," said Captain Shane Malone. He spoke with a slight Irish brogue. He bellowed into a wide-mouthed speaking tube. "All right, my boys. The big bosses are on board, and sheep it is for Santa Juanita island. Tack those sails and hit the breeze!"

Outside, they could hear activities, men moving on the decks, the holler of men. Reed felt the ship move under him and felt that grow to a strong flow of movement. He looked at Nick Blake, but Blake was looking down at the floor, his hands between his knees.

"There's my bunk, Blake," said Malone. "I won't need it tonight."

Blake walked across the cabin, the ship rolling under him. Once he steadied himself against the desk. "Never could get used to these salt water broncs," he growled. "A man can sit the kak on a buckin' bronc an' tell what his next jump'll be by lookin' at his shoulders, but no man can ever out-guess one of these hardwood horses."

Malone winked at Reed, made a wide gesture. "His girl's treated him rough back in port. He's out of sorts, he is."

"Bad tequila," offered Eno Reed.

NICK BLAKE lay on the bunk. The lamplight flickered, and Nick looked idly at the interior with a bored dullness of spirit. Reed lit his pipe, spread his legs wide, and seemed to study the warped hardwood floor. Malone went out on deck, leaving the two alone.

Blake propped his arm under his head. "All right," he asked, "What's next, Reed?"

"Don't rush me, fella."

"We've never used fire, Reed."

Reed had no answer.

Blake looked at him steadily. "Old Rawhide had some good corn fields. About ready to cut, it is; it's dry, too, and it would burn good. His oat

fields are ripe, too, ready for a match"

"I've thought of that," Reed admitted.

Blake spoke forcibly. "You want the island, don't you? You want all of Santa Juanita? Well, it can be gotten—but we have to get ol' Rawhide out first. Get him to quit—or run him out—or kill him— The island is ours, then."

Reed got to his feet. He went to the wall cupboard and got a bottle. He looked inquiringly at Nick Blake, who shook his head. "That tequila doesn't sit right with me, Reed."

Reed poured out some brandy, drank it, poured another drink, and killed it, too. The liquor made a warm feeling in his belly. He corked the bottle, put it back, shut the cupboard doors.

"Old Rawhide Hinton has cattle, pretty fair cattle, too. There's a big market for them in 'Frisco, an' no questions asked by the buyers. We make a good stake each year off his stock. Sometimes I wonder if it ain't best to leave things like they are—him raisin' cattle an' us *borrowin* them?"

"You forget one thing. You forget that Sam Blanding is in on this now. You forget that, Eno Reed."

Captain Shane Malone came into the cabin. "'Tis the devil's dark night out, Eno Reed, and all a man can see is the light off Point Conception. A freighter was passed, loaded with lumber for Los Angeles, and that means 'tis a storm out on the Channel."

He poured a drink, offered the bottle to the two sheepmen, who refused. Malone's heavy brows rose, and he drank alone. He looked at the bottle, holding it at arm's length.

"And it came from Cuba, men; all the way from Cuba. Good brandy, brewed by the natives, with a bit of witchcraft brewed into it. Drink enough an you see the devils comin' for you, their long horns gleaming in the light." He drank again. "Come on, divils, an' plague Shane Malone!"

Reed grinned, but Nick Blake's face was dead. Malone wiped his mouth with the back of a hairy, freckled hand and looked at Eno Reed. "The sheep are in the hold, and the island is nigh, my bucko. Can we unload tonight, or is the night too dark?"

"My men are waiting. There'll be plenty of lanterns."

"Then we push the woollies off into the dark, and when dawn comes we will be back at the dock in Buenaventura, loading our hold with hides from the big *ranchos*. Always this ship carries a stinking, dirty cargo."

Reed went out on deck. There the wind whipped around the north point of Santa Juanita, coming swiftly across the rocky neck of land that ran into the sea and became lost under its waters. Reed went to the rail, windbreaker collar up, and looked at the black, ugly bulk of the island. Ahead, lanterns twinkled on the rocks, their lights seeming to go off and on. The sheepman went to the office again.

"We're comin' in," he said.

Malone went outside but Blake still remained on the bunk. "You got enough men to unload without me," the foreman said.

Reed sensed the man's surly mood, and made no answer.

THEY HAD come closer to the point, and the wind was even stronger. Spray jumped the rail and danced across the deck before dying. Wind sang against spars and whistled in guy-ropes and sails. It pushed men's heavy clothing tight against their muscles, and somewhere a deckhand cursed its sharpness.

They jockeyed the windjammer into the cove, using the lanterns as markers on the shore. Somewhere Reed heard the rattle of water and wind against rocks and to the east he saw the darker outline of a ledge running into the sea. The ship rocked, steadied, rocked, and then came into the cove. Here the wind almost died and the ship was once more on an even keel, gliding into the dock made of rough logs.

"Throw out a line, bucko."

It was Captain Shane Malone's voice. Men were calling from the dock, and Reed felt the boat steady and pull sidewise against the logs. They made to with a rope and tied the boat close to the dock. Malone came up with, "Give us some help with the plank, Reed. Where in the hell is Blake?"

"In the cabin."

"The lazy—" Malone's words died as he pulled on the gangplank. Reed hands were leaping from the dock to help the sailors and they swung the heavy, hoof-scarred plank into position, one end on the ship and the other on the dock. Malone said, "I wish there was a moon. What are you going to do with them, Reed? Run them into corrals until mornin'?"

"They can't swim to the mainland," growled Reed. "They go in on the island, and if they get on old Rawhide's grass, more power to them."

"Heard tell Rawhide was going to string a drift fence across the island? That true, Reed?"

"How would I know? Can I read his mind?"

Malone's grin was bleak but the darkness hid it. They'd swung back part of the deck but the sheep would not come out. They cringed back into the darkness and would not start up the landing-way that led to the dock-plank. One man got in and started kicking them, trying to force them to climb.

Reed made him stop tnat. Evidently the fellow didn't know anything about sheep. Reed went down the plank, grabbed one of the ewes, and dragged her up the rough boards, and the others followed her. Soon they were streaming off the ship, the vessel rocking a little under the imprint of their sharp hoofs. Their bleating was strong on the air and the stench of them was strong, too.

They ran across the gangplank, a gray mass moving under the lantern light. Once on firm soil, they kicked and jumped, evidently glad to be released from their prison. Some of them started grazing. Finally the last one left the ship.

Reed and Captain Malone and Nick Blake were in the cabin. A man stuck in his head with, "They're all off, Captain," and then closed the door. Malone stood up and said, "All right, when do I see you again, men?"

Blake growled, "I don't give a damn if I never see you again."

Malone's eyes were steady and bright. "I can say the same about you, my fair bucko. And if you want to carry this any further, Shane Malone is ready to meet you."

Reed cut in. "Forget that, both of you." He looked sharply at Nick Blake. "Nick, buck up, fellow." Now he spoke to Captain Malone. "Three nights from now, Malone? Can you make it then?"

Malone considered, then nodded. "An' where, men?"

Reed said, "The Point, at midnight. Be there when we have the cattle here. How many can they use up in 'Frisco?"

Malone told him the 'Frisco market could take all Rawhide Hinton had, and then use still more beef. But the price had dropped a little, he'd heard, for beef was coming down from Oregon, and he'd heard some had come in from Australia. At this, Reed looked at him levelly.

"Do your best," he said slowly. "Maybe I ought to go to 'Frisco with you, huh? But I guess I should stay home."

"Make up your mind." Malone was still glaring at Nick Blake.

They went out on the deck. Here the night was calm, and morning was not far away. The crew was pulling in landing planks and tying down the planks on the deck. The sun was rising when Eno Reed and Nick Blake rode out of the pocket.

THEY DREW rein on the ridge and Reed looked back at the sheep grazing in the hollow; two herders and their dogs watched them. For a moment, his eyes were almost soft, cradling some unvoiced, secret thoughts. Then he looked toward the

east, out onto the blue expanse of the Pacific, and the softness left him. and was supplanted by the old, worldly hardness.

With Blake in the lead, they rode down off the rocky ridge, following a twisting, lazy trail. Once a cougar jumped across the trail, two hundred yards away, and Nick Blake's gun was out of holster, singing a fast, deadly song. But the distance was too great for six-gun work, and the big cat, tail lashing behind him, ducked into a clump of buckbrush. Blake broke his gun, kicked the spent cartridges out, and reloaded it.

"You come to life fast," murmured Eno Reed.

Blake grinned with a lazy slowness. "That's the big cat that killed all them sheep over on Hayman Meadows, Reed. There's him, an' another —prob'ly his mate; I've seen them both. How do you reckon a cat ever got over on this island?"

"You read that somewhere, huh?" Reed nodded.

"Me, I never was no hand at a book." Blake rubbed his jaw slowly. "Always saved my eyes for pistol work, I reckon. Yonder's a sailship comin' into the cove, boss."

Reed watched the ship, miles out at sea. "Probably bringing over Sam Blanding." he finally said. "Looks like Gunnar Swanson's fishin' vessel."

The rise of the hill in front of them shut the vessel from their sight. They came into a hollow, grooved by rain and the elements into the rough mountains, and where lay an adobe house with corrals and buildings scattered on the plain. At first, a man would see no plan, no fixed intention, behind the location of the buildings; he would think they had grown unplanned, placed here and there by sheer fancy. But such was not the case.

For Eno Reed, when he'd built his spread, had planned it carefully. The buildings were placed strategically to break the wind properly and to fend off any attack that man would, or could, place against them.

A herder asked, "The new herd in, boss?"

Reed nodded, and he and his foreman rode into the barn. Nick Blake said, "I'm plumb sleepy," and went to the bunkhouse.

Reed stood in the doorway of the barn, looking at his ranch buildings. After a while, he too went to the house, where he ate a late breakfast cooked by his China boy, and then he too hit the sougans.

5

SAM BLANDING had his land legs and some of the throbbing had left his head. He did not tell old Rawhide about being slugged in Buenaventura. The way he figured, the old man had troubles enough without Sam adding to them.

Rawhide Hinton's bronc had fallen and rolled on him. The fall had injured the old man's knee some, but he was getting better slowly.

Sam smiled. "Figured sure either Reed or Blake had sent a hunk of lead through your o'nery carcass, Rawhide. How come you let your bronc fall thataway?"

Rawhide snorted. "Fall! Hell, he stumbled over a wire tied between two trees, back in the brush."

They were eating breakfast. The squaw shuffled back and forth, catering to their needs. Rawhide Hinton shoveled in some eggs. Around them, he told about his fall. He'd been loping through the tall brush, following a dim trail, and his bronc had gone tail-over-tincup.

"An' me, I plumb figure that either Reed, or that snake of his'n, Nick Blake, tied that wire there. A hard fall would kill an old man like me."

"So you finally admit you're old!" Jose Martinez's dark face was amused.

"Don't git fresh with your lip, Jose, or I'll can you."

Martinez looked at Sam, and shrugged. "All the time he is goin' to can me, he says. But he never does."

Sam went to sleep for a couple of hours. The squaw pulled the blinds low and the room was dark. The combination of the blow on his skull and the sea sickness had left him in rather poor shape. When he awoke at noon his headache had left and he felt more like his old self again.

They had dinner and Sam went out to inspect the buildings. Martinez told him they aimed to run out a round-up wagon soon; they were, in fact, waiting for him to come to ramrod the gather. The crew was shoeing broncs and oiling gear, patching harnesses and saddles, and getting the outfit tip-top for the coming round-up. Sam met the six men comprising the crew, and Martinez told him they were all old hands, having ridden for Rawhide all the time he'd been on Santa Juanita.

The sun was warm, and there was no wind. But over on the other side of Santa Juanita, according to Martinez, the wind would be howling, coming off the Pacific. The backbone of mountains that comprised the island's center broke the wind and deflected it.

"Your stock wild?" asked Sam.

Si, las vacas—the cows—were wild. More so on the other side of the island, the foreman said. They seldom saw a man over there, and when they did see one—Martinez made a gesture and spat tobacco juice.

So far, there had been a few clashes with either Reed or his men. Once a RB rider had found a flock grazing on RB grass, and he and the sheepherder had fought. He had whipped the man with his fists, but Nick Blake, who had come galloping up, had slugged the cowpuncher with his gun, knocking him cold. When the man had come to, the herd was gone.

Sam fingered his own scalp. Blake was handy at knocking out a man with a gun, huh? Gradually he was getting the feel of the range, getting cognizance of the trouble there. Had the RB lost any cattle?

"*Senor Sam,* that is hard to tell. With cattle back in the brush, some we do not see from one roundup to the other—" He stroked his bottom lip. "*Si,* I think we have lost cattles, and many of them."

Sam saw the catch-dogs in their pen. They were hounds for the most part, long-legged and slim of barrel. They barked and stood on their hind legs, forefeet against the poles of their pen, as he watched them. They were sleek and wiry, not too fat; he figured they were in good shape for the coming roundup.

Martinez told him the cacti and thorns were hard on the dogs' feet and sometimes penetrated their tough hides. Sam went to the corral, got his rope, laid it on a mouse-colored buckskin gelding, and pulled him in.

OLD RAWHIDE was sitting on the porch. He waved to them as they loped by. Sam wanted to see the boundary line between the RB and the Reed sheep outfit, and Martinez took him across dim trails and up canyons to a high mesa.

There, under the cold shadow of the mountain, they drew rein and rested their blowing broncs. And the Mexican showed the general outlines of the *rancho,* his arm swinging in the high air.

"As near as we can figure, the line runs about in here, *Senor* Sam. Yonder is the hacienda of Don Pablo Alvarez, *Dios* rest his generous soul." He pointed toward the east flank of the mountain. "You cannot see it, for the brush hide the yards."

Sam sat saddle, resting on one stirrup, his eyes on the mythical boundary line. A canyon cut in sharply, angling to the northeast; then the line took out again, running across the flat and so to the beach.

"We should run a drift fence," murmured the man from the Black Hills. "Then, we'd know for sure which grass is ours, an' which belongs to Eno Reed."

"That would be a hard job, *senor.*"

"But it could be done. Has Rawhide ever mentioned it?"

Yes, Rawhide had mentioned it. The surveyor in Buenaventura had been contacted, even, and he would

come out and survey, using the deeds granted by *Senor* Pablo Alvarez to establish the bases of the line. But what would they do when they came to the canyon? Surely a man could not put posts down its steep sides, for they were of gray granite.

"We could blast out holes. We did that in the Black Hills."

Martinez shrugged. Sam found himself liking the man a lot. They both turned their horses as a rider rode out of the brush. Sam recognized Don Miguel Alvarez. The dandy rode a flat-forked saddle, marked by silver and by rich hand-carved leather. His palomino pulled at the bit and rolled its cricket; the silver-plated headstall and martingale reflected the afternoon light.

They exchanged greetings. "You have met the *Senor* Sam Blanding?" Martinez asked the youth.

"Only by sight, in Buenaventura."

Sam and Miguel shook hands, leaning forward from their stirrups. And Sam Blanding found himself again trying to catalog the youth. His eyes were sharp, showing intelligence, and his lips were firm, but Sam thought he detected a weakness in the man's jaw. He was vain, that was true. His gaudy outfit told Sam that.

"You ride for your cattle?" asked Martinez.

Miguel told them he was doing just that, figuring some of their stock might have strayed on RB range. Anza was with him, somewhere out in the brush, with her catch-dog, Diablo. Miguel called for her, the echoes washing from the rocky sides of the mountain. Finally, from below them, came her answer.

Sam mentioned the idea of running a drift fence. Miguel nodded, his dark face serious, and said that might be a good idea but that the fence would be hard to string. He asked about the coming round-up, saying that his father would want a rep to ride with the RB wagon.

"He's sure welcome," Sam agreed.

ANZA RODE out of the brush, winding up her rawhide riata. Her outfit was the direct opposite of her brother's. Her saddle, low of fork and cantle, was brush-worn, and the only silver it carried was the conchos on the saddle strings. She had on a split, buckskin riding skirt and a silk blouse. Her boots were rough-scarred half-boots, her spurs blue-steel with blunt rowels. She sat a wiry gray gelding.

"I hazed fifteen head back," she said to her brother. Then, to Sam, "You will excuse our cattle now and then, *senor*, if they wander on your grass? Our range is small, due to circumstance, and we hope to ship out some after the roundup, for I think we have too many cattle for the acreage we own."

Sam nodded. There was a small silence. Once the Alvarez family had owned the island, and only cattle bearing their iron had grazed on it. Now, due to time and conditions, they were almost outsiders, running only a few head of stock.

Sam said, "Don't worry about it, miss."

"If you build a drift fence, *Senor* Blanding, my father will send a man or two to help do our share of the work, and we will gladly pay for our share of the fence when it comes to our property."

"Thanks, miss."

They talked a while longer about the drift fence and the coming round-up, and Sam found himself looking at Anza. Her gaze met his and held and then she looked away, smiling a little. And Sam Blanding, for some reason, was suddenly glad he had left the Black Hills of South Dakota.

"We must ride," said Miguel, "for sundown comes soon these winter days."

Anza spoke. "You two will drop by the hacienda on your way back to the RB, will you not? For surely Papa will be glad to meet the *Senor* Blanding."

"How far is it?" asked Sam.

She told him, "About four miles, I guess," and looked at Miguel, who nodded confirmation Sam thought he

caught a sulkiness creeping in to touch the young man's lips, but he wasn't sure. Martinez promised they would stop and say hello to Don Pablo, and the brother and sister rode out into the brush and became lost from sight. Martinez sighed with a slow heaviness.

"That *muchacha*—that girl— Ah, if only I were not a middle-aged, gray-haired old man—" He took off his hat. "See, *senor*, my gray hairs!"

His hair was almost all black, and Sam grinned. "She is a beauty, at that." Or was it Anza's beauty? No, she wasn't so pretty; she was just so healthy and friendly and appeared to be good company. Sam found himself smiling. "Come on, *amigo;* we came here to look for cattle and scout a drift fence, not talk about a pretty *senorita.*"

"You Americanos, you are too practical," grumbled Martinez.

They swung around the toe of the mountain, with Martinez in the lead, and Sam riding behind, facing his thoughts. He glanced up at the gullies that ran into the base of the mountains. They were deep and wild and dark, and he wondered what secrets —if any—they could tell, had they tongue to express what they had seen. Jose Martinez's words now, coming abruptly and quick, broke into his thoughts.

"Up ahead, *Senor* Sam. There in the clearing, a rider has just come out. Who is he, *senor?*"

They sat saddles in the thick manzanita. The rider did not see them as he rode out on a mesa covered by green grass.

"Nick Blake, ain't it?" asked Sam.

Martinez nodded, tugged a mustache. "Looks like him. But my eyes are not what they should be."

"That's him," murmured Sam.

He told his foreman to remain in the brush and watch, for there might be another Reed rider around, and he did not want an intruder to sneak up on him. Martinez nodded, face dark, and pulled his rifle from scabbard.

"I watch your back, *amigo* Sam."

6

NICK BLAKE pulled his horse around, his face falling into stern outlines. He sat there, tense in his leather, his left hand holding his latigo-leather bridle-reins, his right on the fork of his kak, close to the black butt of the pistol on his right hip. And a cigarette hung between his lips.

Sam Blanding stopped his bronc. "You remember me, nuh, Nick Blake?"

"You're Sam Blanding, I take it. My memory ain't too short, Blanding." The smoke trickled up from the cigarette and hid Blake's thin eyes for a brief second. Then the wind moved the smoke, but by this time Blake's eyes were without thought.

Sam Blanding glanced beyond Blake, looking into the thick brush. His level gaze came back to the man. He said, "Get down off'n that saddle of yours, Blake. You look saddle-tired to me."

Blake studied him. "What do you mean?"

Sam Blanding was on the ground now. He let his reins fall, ground-anchoring his buckskin, and he walked over to Blake's horse. "I said you look saddle-tired. You oughta come down and palaver a mite with me."

"I'm all right up here," growled Nick Blake.

"You're on RB grass." Sam had the distance he wanted. He reached up now, and he hooked his hand around Blake's thick gun-harness. He braced his feet wide and jerked, and Blake hooked his left thigh around the fork of his saddle, tying himself to his kak. Sam jerked again, and this time Blake left the bronc. He came down on his feet; his horse trotted off.

Blake spread his legs wide. Sam had stepped back. Blake's eyes were sharp on the Black Hills man; there was no fear in them, Sam saw. There was surprise, but not fear; Sam had the impression that the man was tough, granite-tough.

"What's your game?" asked Blake huskily.

Sam snapped his words. "Down in Buenaventura last night some son slugged me. I asked a few questions and did a little thinkin', an' the signs all pointed to you, fellow. You were the little boy with the pistol, huh?"

Blake did not deny the accusation. But his fist, coming up fast and hard, missed as Sam moved in, hitting with both fists. Sam felt the fist lose its mauling power on his back, spending itself harmlessly. He put both hands hard into Blake's chest, and he heard Blake grunt.

Then Blake's other fist smashed against Sam's guts. The blow was low, hitting the cowpuncher directly above the groin, and driving pain sharply across his belly. Sam had to give ground, and as he did he growled, "So you want to fight dirty, huh? Well, I'll accommodate you, fellow!"

Still he went backwards. He did not fight flat-footed, like Blake was fighting. He was on his toes, and he never let his boots leave the ground. He had the reach, he knew, but Blake had more power—he was lower and more compact, and he could hit. Sam was sure of that already.

So he kept moving back, boots shuffling across the grass. Now and then, when Blake's guard was down, he planted his Justins solidly, and he hit with all he had. And Blake took all he had. He took it with a crooked, rough grin on his broken lips; he took it by a fierce burst of counter-fighting.

And Sam found himself wondering if he could whip the man. Blake had been schooled in the hard, rough-and-tumble school of barroom fighting. He used his knees, he used his elbows, he butted in the clinches. But Sam, too, had done some rough-and-tumble work. His knees were as hard as Blake's, his elbows as wicked and fast, and his head was hard enough, too.

SAM KNEW that time was in his favor. He was younger than Blake, and he did less drinking and smoking. Those two factors, he knew, had cut down Blake's wind. So he fought cautiously, only hitting when a good opportunity came. The rest of the time he butted with his head, blocked with shoulders and elbows.

But he was taking punishment, although he was handing out some, too. He tried to keep back his anger at the recollection of how Blake had slugged him, for he knew this anger might prove his down-fall. A man needed a clear head facing a man like Blake, and anger would only deter his success.

Blake was breathing heavily now, and his power was failing. Sam waited for ten seconds, blocking and feinting, and then Blake was right He had moved off his feet, putting in a hard blow, and he leaned ahead a little, slightly off balance. These facts registered on Sam and he took advantage of them.

A hard right came in, missed, and a left followed. The fist straightened Blake, who grunted, and Sam's right came in again, lifting Blake. Two other fast blows, crushing in naked power, set Blake flat on his feet, straightening him. Sam hit four times again, wondering if Blake would ever go down.

His shoulders ached, his knuckles were raw. He knew that if he didn't down Blake now, he could never down him. Blake tried to fight back, but his strength was gone. Sam dropped him on the grass.

He stepped back, badly winded, and spread his legs wide. He said. "I oughta take the boots to you, you damn' cur! I oughta kick your damn' head in. You'd've killed me down there, if the girl an' the hotel clerk hadn't come!"

Blake tried to sit up, but couldn't. He half sobbed, "I've got enough, Blandin'. You're tough, man."

"And I'll get tougher, hombre."

"Now ain't that jus' too touchin' for words!"

The voice came from behind Sam. He turned. Eno Reed was walking toward him, and Reed had a rifle on him. His horse stood just inside the

rim of brush, reins dragging.

Sam asked, "You were hidin' in the brush?"

Reed said, "Get up, Blake!" his voice harsh. Blake got slowly to his feet, rubbing the back of his hand across his nose and mouth. "You're not much count with your fists, Blake!"

"Sometimes when you feel lucky, you call him!" snarled Blake.

Sam was silent, feeling the animosity between the two men. But it was only coming out of the moment. They were bound together in evil, and they were both against him always. even if they did occasionally quarrel with one another. He remembered Jose Martinez, back in the brush. Evidently Reed did not know about the Mexican hiding behind him.

SAM CALLED, "Jose!"

"Here!"

Reed turned, and saw the Mexican. Jose Martinez had his rifle on Reed; his lips were pulled back. Sam lunged, grabbed Reed's rifle, and they fought for it. He got a boot behind the sheepman, pushed him, and they crashed to the ground, fighting for the rifle. Out of the corner of one eye he saw that Blake stood silent, hands discreetly kept away from his pistol.

Martinez had his rifle barrel in Reed's back. "Let go of that rifle," he ordered. Sam later marveled at the terrible ferocity in the Mexican's tone.

Reed stiffened.

Sam heard Martinez cock the rifle. "I can shoot right through you, Reed," the Mexican purred. "There is no danger of my bullet hittin' *Senor* Sam!"

Reed released his hold on the rifle. Sam got to his feet, holding the sheepman's weapon. He jacked the cartridges out of it, then tossed it to Reed, who caught it with a curse.

Reed growled, "Well, what's the play? I'm checkin' it to you."

Again raw savagery edged Martinez's words. "We should kill you, shoot you down in cold blood. But alas, a man cannot do that, even to wild dogs like you two." He shrugged and grinned suddenly. "What do you say *Senor* Sam?"

Sam had Blake's gun. He unloaded it, tossed it back to the man. "No, we can't do that, Jose." He spoke now to the two sheepmen. "This is RB range, and if we ever catch you two on our grass again, we shoot to kill. We won't use our fists."

"Run a drift fence in," growled Eno Reed. "How can a man tell where your grass is, if no fence marks it?"

Sam laughed shortly. "You knew you were on our range, fellow. You knew that without a drift fence showin' you. But we're runnin' that fence through, an' if we find you or your hands cuttin' it—" He left the rest to their imagination.

"Get your broncs," ordered Jose Martinez. "Get them, and ride away."

The two sheepmen found saddles, and Reed curbed his rearing mount, glaring down at Sam's pistol and at Martinez's rifle. "You got the upper hand now," he said, "but there's always another day—"

They rode off, broncs kicking dust behind them, and hit the brush. Already Sam and Jose Martinez were mounted and riding into the manzanita. Sam said, "They might load their weapons and come back," but the Mexican shrugged lazily.

"They have had their bellies filled, *Senor* Sam."

And from a high ridge they saw that Martinez's assumption had been correct. For in the distance, drifting across the gathering dusk of the late afternoon, were the two sheepmen, riding hard for their home ranch.

THEY STOPPED their horses beside a spring that ran out of riven rock from the mountain. The water was cold as ice on Sam's bruised face and he studied himself in the clear pool of water, but the dusk was so thick it was difficult to determine whether or not the eye would get black.

Martinez chuckled. "Eno Reed, he no see me come from the brush. Hola, he turn aroun'— His face, she is su'-

prised, no? Why worry about the eye, *senor?* If he gets black—" He shrugged and pulled at a mustachio. "Maybe the *Senorita* Anza she no like the American with a black eye, huh?" He laughed at his own joke.

"What're you talkin' about?"

"Ah, I see your eyes meet. I see the look and the smile she give you. Hola, if she gave that to me—" He sighed loudly. "But I am the old man."

"You're not old enough to mind your own business," grunted Sam. He wiped his face gingerly on the coat tied to his saddle-strings. "Well, we go and see Don Pablo, nuh?"

Dusk was deep when they came into the *rancho* of the Alvarez family. According to Martinez, Don Pablo owned a wedge that drove part way down between the RB iron and Reed's sheep ranch. The don met them as they drew rein in front of the long porch that ran the length of the adobe hacienda.

"You will come in, *senores?*" he asked.

Marinez introduced Sam Blanding, who came down and shook hands with Don Pablo. He instantly liked the slim, quiet-mannered old man. He judged Don Pablo to be close to sixty for his hair was very gray. His face was lined and his faded brown eyes were sharp as he studied Sam's features. Sam saw he was wondering what had happened to his visitor's face, but he realized the don was too polite to ask questions.

"Sam, he tangle with a cougar," said Jose Martinez, smiling.

They were in the big living room. Mexican rugs, gaudy and bright, covered the hardwood floor, and candles sputtered in niches on the wall. "He was a big cougar, then," said the don, also smiling.

Sam told about his fight with Nick Blake.

Don Pablo showed a big smile. "Those two have looked for that for a long time," he allowed. "Mind you, *senores,* I do not approve of violence, and I do not wish you to think I take sides in this trouble. I am an old man and do not want any more strife. But if it is inevitable, I shall meet it. But come, *Senor* Blanding, I want you to meet *Senora* Alvarez, for I think you have already met Esperanza and my *hijo,* Don Miguel?"

Dona Alvarez was a slender, gray-haired woman with a quick smile and curtsy. Supper, she said, was about ready—would the RB *senores* eat with them? They would be flattered. Jose Martinez looked inquiringly at Sam.

"We have a long way to ride home yet," Sam murmured. "And old Rawhide will be like a hen with a bunch of new chicks, cluckin' aroun' an' wondering if anythin' has happened to us."

"You must stay." Dona Alvarez was insistent.

The meal was excellent, served on white linen, and Sam felt out of place. For one thing, his face wasn't any too pleasant to carry around, puffed up as it was in various places, and for another, most of his eating had been done around a chuck-wagon, seated cross-legged on the ground, his tin plate across his lap.

Don Miguel was silent for the most part, only getting in on the conversation now and then. The tomboyishness seemed to have deserted Anza and left her a demure young lady. Sam found himself wondering if Dona Alvarez's presence did not account for some of her daughter's demureness.

Don Pablo Alvarez, warmed by two tall goblets of fine Muscatel, carried the conversation. Sam had wondered if the don would be bitter about his loss of Santa Juanita island, but the man did not sound that way. Of course, it was apparent to him that the family was bothered by their fall in caste, for they made no mention of the former large size of their *rancho.*

The meal finished, they went to the living room, where Dona Alvarez played the piano, and Anza sang two songs. She had a nice voice, Sam decided, and he let his inner tension die momentarily.

Don Pablo rode with them for a mile or so. The night was still with many stars, and somewhere a breaker kept pounding against the rocks; the sound was dull and distant in the thin night. They came to the fork and Don Pablo reined in. He gave his hand to Sam, and Sam felt the don's wiry grip.

"You will come again, *Senor* Blanding? And bring *Senor* Hinton with you. He is a good checker player, and I would like to meet him again on the board. Tell him I shall be over and see him in a few days, if he does not come to see me first."

"He'll be around soon," stated Jose Martinez.

Don Pablo turned his palomino. He said, *"Buenas noches,"* and trotted toward home, his weight high on his stirrups. Sam glanced back once, but the man was already out of sight.

"They are nice people," said Jose Martinez slowly. "The ol' don, he is the best, and so is the dona. Did you notice Anza? How quiet she was, what a good girl?" He chuckled. "The little hell-cat, her. But that boy—" He shook his head.

"He's a dude," affirmed Sam.

"Yes, and it takes dinero to buy new silver saddles, and the Alvarez's are not making any money now, just enough to get along good."

Sam said, "You're worse'n an ol' lady, Jose."

7

NEXT MORNING Nick Blake's left eye was swollen shut. Eno Reed noticed this and, when Blake wasn't looking, he winked at the young Chinaman who cooked and kept house fo them.

"Horse click you?" asked the Chinese.

"Don't ask no damn fool questions!" Nick Blake ground out the words. "You jus' cook an' keep the house in order and don't shoot off your mouth, an' me an' you will get along much better!"

The Chinaman, surprised and hurt, glanced at Eno Reed, who winked again. "Hoss throwed him yesterday, Shanghai. That ol' pinto hoss tossed him, an' he ain't bucked for years. Blake's still tryin' to figure out what happened."

"Slorry. Mister Blake. More coffee?"

Blake stirred the wild-goat cream into his coffee. Shanghai had trapped two nanny goats, back on the hill, and was finally milking them. How he ever got them tame enough to get into the same pen with them, let alone milk them, was something that Eno Reed could never understand.

Reed shoved back his chair, rolled a cigarette, and licked it into shape. He was thinking that most of the hired hands on his ranch, especially the sheepherders, didn't even understand what was going on on Santa Juanita. Well, that was all right, he figured. The less they knew the less they could tell.

He paid his herders double the wages they would have gotten on the mainland. That kept them contented and on the job. He knew that most of them would have rather herded on the mainland, where they could get into a town once in a while, but the double pay kept them on their jobs. Most of them would work about a year, get their wages all in one lump, go into Los Angeles or San Francisco, then loaf for a year and go out to work again only when they were broke.

He kept three riders on his payroll, paying them two hundred a month. They were saddlemen and they had the saddleman's disdain for sheep, and he never asked them to have anything to do with the woolies. They knew what was going on on Santa Juanita, for they rode with him and Blake on dark, wet winter nights, but each had his share in what was going on, and each, because of his high wages, kept quiet. They were loyal to him because of the money they made, not because they liked him.

Reed studied Nick Blake now, the smoke from his cigarette lifting lazily across his eyes. "Stay close to home today, Nick. Take it easy. Me an' the boys will work the back country."

"I'll earn my wages," said Blake surlily.

Reed felt the swift tug of sudden anger, and his face showed his hardness. "All right, pal, if it's a saddle you want, step into it." He went outside into the sunshine and down the path to the barn. The mozo had five horses in stalls, good saddle broncs, and they'd been grained after eating good hay all night. Reed got his saddle and put it on a wide-rumped bay. He cinched the three-quarter rig down, pulling the latigo in hard, for the country was rough, the slants steep. And a man would have to keep his kak from crawling across a bronc's withers. He unhooked the stirrup from around the horn, let it fall, pulled his rifle from boot, and verified its loads. Satisfied, he put the rifle back, the walnut stock showing above the cream-colored leather of the scabbard.

His men were saddling, too, and he nodded to each, then went up. He rode out and pulled in, feeling the good sunshine. He waited until his riders got around him, and then he gave his orders.

As usual, they would work the west side of Santa Juanita, on RB grass, of course. They were to ride ridges and run cattle down in the brakes but not try to bunch them too much.

"And if we run into any RB riders?" asked one man.

Reed looked at him with a scowl. Finally he said, "We've got a good thing here, men, and I'd hate to see it busted up. We're all making good money out of it, but if a RB hand jumps you, shoot to kill him. But keep out of their way if you can. That's why I ask you to ride ridges, that way, up high like that, a man can duck back into the brush and hide, and he can see the man below him first nine times out of ten."

"How many head do we need?" asked another.

"The boat'll take two hundred, maybe more if the stock is smaller."

"There's that many RB cattle over there."

"And more than that," assured another.

They looked at each other, four men sitting good horseflesh, and they were satisfied, content with the thievery they had to accomplish. One asked, "And Nick, and the young don? They coming?"

"Be with us later," Reed assured him.

THEY LOPED out, heading to the south. They followed the road up the plateau, and there the wind hit them for the first time. It swept in from the Pacific, and below them breakers smashed against the igneous rock shores. It had a chill in it, and it carried moisture in it, and they untied windbreakers and pulled up collars. There was a high fog, too, and it shut out the sun, wrapping the green world in a queer dark blanket, breaking now and then as the tips of boulders pushed their way upward through the mist. Meanwhile down at the *rancho*, sheltered from the wind, the sun still poured down on the windless earth.

"Be a good day to work cattle," murmured Reed.

And that it was. For the fog, shutting off the sun, made vision uncertain; they would be hard to see, working yonder side hills and that long plateau that ran upward toward the mountains. And because it was chilly their broncs would work better and not tire so fast, for the cattle were wild there.

"Rider ahead," a man stated, "an' he looks like Miguel."

Miguel Alvarz had his fancy saddle on a palomino that pawed the ground and rolled the cricket in his silver-inlaid spade bit.

"You ought to ride a dark horse," growled Reed, "an' leave that showy silver home. If the moon hit it it would throw a reflection that could be seen miles away."

"My rig, not yours, Reed."

Reed had a hard answer, but held it unvoiced. He'd told the Mexican before not to ride a light-colored horse and to tote such flashy trappings. But so far his counsel had been unheeded.

However, he needed Miguel Alvarez on his side; Miguel was situated

in a strategic spot—between the RB *rancho* and his own sheep outfit. He could watch RB riders and keep Reed posted on their whereabouts and doings.

Sometimes he wondered why the Mexican youth rode with him. He knew that Miguel had no friendship or respect for him or Nick Blake. They were to him just plain thieves. Surely he didn't ride with them because he liked them.

Once Reed and the youth had been rather friendly, and he'd told the big cowman he wanted to go to South America and start a cow outfit. He was saving his money with this purpose in view.

Reed knew, also, that Miguel had a big bankroll in a San Francisco bank. He himself had been named beneficiary of the fund, should anything happen to Miguel. Miguel had not wanted to name his father and mother—or Anza—as a beneficiary, and the bank had demanded a name. Therefore he had assigned Reed to that role.

Miguel was proud of his blood. Once the Alvarez *familia* had owned the entire island; they had been feudal barons, ruling with a benevolent hand. Don Pablo had been too trusting; he had been a good host, but a poor manager. People had taken advantage of his good nature; they'd stalled on debts.

The island had become run down and cattle disappeared. Raiders had dropped broncs and riders off boats on dark nights. These raids had cut into the Alvarez herds and helped bankrupt the family.

Shane Malone had headed the raids. He had hired Nick Blake and Eno Reed to raid with him. Reed remembered Sam Blanding whipping Nick Blake, and he remembered that he also had tasted the power of young Sam Blanding. With old Rawhide running the RB spread, the set-up had been a cinch; but with Sam Blanding there, with his youth and power and his gun—Soon, Reed thought, the chips will be all on the table—gunsmoke will name the winner. In twenty-four hours the whole thing had changed, and changed drastically.

THEY SPLIT up, the high fog masking the sun, the wind shrill and cruel. They made arrangements to meet at noon in a grove of pinons high on a rocky mesa that overlooked all the land because of its height. Reed watched his riders fan out and move into the day, and he looked hard at Miguel Alvarez, riding out of sight in the manzanita. He remembered the youth's arrogance, and this rubbed like sandpaper against his own vanity, What would be Miguel's place in this showdown when it came?

Reed remembered Blake's words, "And what about the kid, Reed? I'm afraid of him; he might talk," and his face pulled into hard lines. But he swung his bronc, lifting him on his hind legs, and loped into the hills. He liked a good horse and a stout saddle, and he liked to work cattle. Sheep paid him money, and they were a good blind for his real purpose on the island, but cattle gave a man a chase and cattle gave him and his bronc a run.

For these cattle were wild. Here on the west side of Santa Juanita, where the rocks were whipped by an eternal wind, where the mists hung in layers across boulders and hill tops, they had drifted of their own accord. They had gone to this wilderness because they were wild themselves.

Rawhide Hinton had never run a roundup wagon over there. He had been ready to take a wagon out the year before. Reed had worked hard, but an attack of rheumatism had floored the old saddleman, so he had called off the gather. Reed figured the old man had made good money on the stock he had gathered across the ridge, in the east side of the range.

For the Mexican cattle, gaunt and bony when they had been unloaded on Santa Juanita, had grown fat and solid, roaming up and down the tough slants, grazing on the green grama grass and green bunchgrass. Also, Rawhide had turned some good bulls loose, Hereford stock, and they had

bred up the cows. The Mexican cows had thrown some good calves, Reed saw.

He jumped a bunch of cattle, about ten head or so, and turned them toward the ocean. They poured over the rocky ridge, running hard to get away from him, and disappeared in a gully. Ten minutes later, he saw them again. They were down below him, mere specks in the gray distance, moving down the gully toward the beach.

He saw a rider behind him, and he pulled into a clump of high chamiso. The man came closer, and Eno Reed rode out. The rider saw him, then, and he puts his hand on his gun. Then he took his hand back.

"You jump some men thataway," growled Nick Blake, "an' they'll gut-shoot you first, an' recognize you later!"

Reed looked at him and grinned. "That eye is getting really bad," he said. He shook his head slowly.

Anger brought a flush to Nick Blake's swollen face; then he saw that Reed was joking with him. He pulled his beard a little, giving his emotions a release through physical action. "Reed," he said, "I love you. Damn' if I don't. I love you well enough to cut your dam' throat." He changed the subject. "How goes it *amigo?*"

"Cattle," said Reed, "but they're wild."

"They always are," admitted Nick Blake. He braced his hand against his cantle's rim and twisted in leather. "There ain't so many of them, though. I guess we got this huntin' groun' played out, huh?"

"Prob'ly more back on the hills. They don't stay close to the ocean on a damp day like this."

Nick Blake was studying the hills carefuly. 'That might be," he admitted. He turned and looked flatly at Eno Reed. "But this bunch will play out, then we get cattle on the west side, huh? Raid them out of ol' Rawhide's front yard, you might say?"

"We play for high stakes," Reed stated levelly.

Nick Blake was silent.

Reed said, "Blake, I like you. We've been together for a long long time. You can ride out, if you want. I wouldn't do that to anybody but you, you know that. But the trail is yours, Blake."

Blake rode close, their saddle-skirts touched. He put his arm around Eno Reed and hugged him. "Honey," he joked, "how nice of you!" He moved his horse back, solemn now. "Eno, when the last gun is fired, when the last mile is rode, I'll ride it with you, fellow. Ol' Nick Blake may belly-ache, but his gun is your gun. And don't never forget that, Eno Reed."

"What a man," murmured Reed. "What a man."

THEY WORKED cattle together, working as a team. One up high, hazing them down; the other riding down below, giving them another run as they pulled out of the hills. Blake was right. Cattle were getting scarce there.

Reed rode wildly, his bullwhip working. The chips were falling, coming down fast, for cattle were scarce there. That meant that raids would have to be made on the east, and the danger grew greater over there. Blake was right. There was no denying that.

He jumped four head out of manzanita, smashed them to a fast run with his bullwhip. One was a two-year bull, a black and gray beef strangely out of place, because of his color, among the red and white Mexican cattle. Evidently he was a throw-back to some Holstein milk strain, Reed figured. He eyed the bull, saw that he had beef, and mentally made a note to see that he ended up in San Francisco on the butcher's block.

All the time, he worked toward the pinon grove where he would meet his riders at noon. Once he consulted his watch; the hands read almost half past eleven.

Ten minutes later, he saw a rider in the distance. He knew it was not one of his men, so he pulled back into the brush. Blake rode up and said, "That's a stranger, Eno. Now who is it?"

Reed had his field glasses. He found the rider and held the glasses on him, then wordlessly handed them

to Nick Blake, who adjusted them, looked, then handed them back. "Sam Blanding," he murmured.

Reed said, "Another rider, yonder."

Blake took the glasses again. "That's Jose Martinez, Eno. Now what are they ridin' this grass for?"

"Roundup, I'd say. They aim to work the cattle on this side of the mountain."

Blake looked at him, his eyes heavy with thought. "They won't find many to work," he said. He smiled at that, and rocked back in his saddle, hands braced on his fork. "Well, we'll move our bunch out tomorrow night, huh? And when they run their wagon here, we'll make our next raid to the east."

"That'll be it, Nick."

Blake rubbed his palm on his whiskers. "Now when will the wagon come out? Not tomorrow, anyway. From what I hear, they got some work to do before they can run out a roundup wagon."

Reed shrugged. "Who knows? Anyway, wagon or no wagon, we move our bunch tomorrow night, even if they're shoved on board Malone's ship with gunsmoke blisterin' their tails."

They looked for their three riders. Evidently they had also sighted the RB riders, for neither of them could see a Reed man. And this made Reed smile, a slow, satisfied smile.

"They got eyes," he said. "They're smart enough."

"Good hands," murmured Blake.

THEY WORKED through the brush now, always watching the two riders below. They saw Blanding and Martinez come to the small bunch that had the off-colored black and gray bull in it.

Finally they reached the pinon grove on the mesa. Two of their riders were already at the meeting place. They had hidden their broncs back in the pinons and they sat among the rocks and watched the RB riders below. There the wind was broken by the boulders and it was calm. Reed settled down beside them and asked, "Where's the other boy?"

"We seen him a minute ago, boss. He'd worked behin' them RB men, an' was headin' this way."

Reed looked, but couldn't see him. Neither could Nick Blake see him. In ten minutes, Miguel Alvarez rode into the grove, left his bronc and came to the men who hunkered there on the lip of the cut and watched.

"The other man is behin' me," said the Mexican.

Reed liked the warmth of the sun, there where the wind could not reach with its cold touch. He nodded and said, "You two travel good through the brush. None of us could see you down below."

They had cold meat and they chewed on it. It was jerked turtle from Yucatan, a hard, tough meat, but full of flavor and taste. Soon the other rider came in, left his bronc, untied his meal from his saddle, and bowlegged over to them, where he settled cross-legged.

"I was close to them," he said. "It's that new gent, Sam Blanding, and the old foreman, Jose Martinez."

Reed said, "We saw them through glasses."

"They're goin' south," said a rider. "They're almost out of sight."

"We'll wait here," said Reed.

8

THAT MORNING Sam Blanding and Jose Martinez had again ridden to the point where the drift fence would cross the island. Old Rawhide Hinton had wanted to go with Sam and his foreman, but they had both talked him out of it.

"Might be that you could sit a horse," argued Sam, "but a long ride would make you plumb tuckered out, Rawhide."

"Better wait a day or so," agreed Martinez.

They had left the oldster watching them from the barn door.

"He is like the old fire horse," said Martinez. "Always, he has been in action, and now he is brokenhearted. He is getting well fast, though, no?"

Sam nodded. He touched his pony

to a lope and Martinez swung in behind him. He was well fed, had had a good night's sleep, and he had a good horse under his legs. Some of the swelling had left his face, too, although one eye was coal black. He'd looked at it in the mirror that morning and decided it was the blackest black eye he'd ever had, and he'd had quite a few.

The night before he and old Rawhide and Jose Martinez had held a long conference. Was it more essential to build the drift fence than it was to start the roundup wagon on the west side of Santa Juanita? Rawhide had claimed he knew damn' well that Eno Reed was stealing cattle—his cattle—but so far he'd never caught him at it. The island was too big to patrol, and too rough to watch continuously—and besides, nights got dark, awfully dark.

Of course, a few head of sheep crossed the mythical borderline between the RB and Reed's sheep outfit, but the damage they had done hadn't been much, for the RB riders had turned them back in a few hours. The thing was to keep RB cattle from wandering over on Reed grass. For once over there, they never came back. Rawhide pounded on the table, he spat on the floor—he was that mad and excited.

Sam had listened politely and then put in some questions of his own. Was there any law on Santa Juanita? Rawhide answered that with, "Only what a man has in his knuckles or carries in his gun." According to him, the island, although under the jurisdiction of the United States, was not a part of Buenaventura County, and therefore was not entitled to protection by the sheriff's office.

"From what I understan', Sam, the Coast Guard has control of this island, for it's in the shipping lanes, they tell me. But, hades, I ain't seen a Coast Guard man for the whole time I've been here."

"Could we appeal to them?" Sam wanted to know.

Jose Martinez had answered that. "What would be the use? Could they patrol the island, with two men working out of the Los Angeles harbor, any better than we can, with six men or so on our payroll?"

Sam smiled crookedly. "Guess that's out of the question, too. But they must be shippin' your beef to market along the coast, Rawhide. Can't a state brand inspector check an' find out where your beef are going? What are they doing with the hides and the brands?"

Rawhide shook his head doggedly. "Sam, there's a hundred places along the coast a man could unload cattle without a brand inspector gettin' wise. As for the hides, maybe they sink them, bury them, but the great chance is they just ship them around the tip of South America and into Boston and make shoes outa them. No, I've given this thought: there's no use in appealing to the Coast Guard or the brand inspectors. We're the law here, and we have to make our law."

"He is right," affirmed Martinez.

"I'm not lookin' for a way to dodge trouble," San had spoken convincingly. "But it would be best if possible, to get this tended to legally. But as you say, that can't be done, so it's us against them, huh?"

"That's the deal, boy."

"Well, what about the drift fence?" Sam asked. "That first, or gather cattle?"

THEY HAD decided to let the choice rest until Sam had seen the western side of Santa Juanita. There were a few head of sheep across the drift fence line, and Sam and Martinez turned them back.

The herder had come up, jabbering in a language strictly unfamiliar to Sam, who looked inquiringly at Martinez, who spoke in Mexican. They talked for some time; Sam understood little of the conversation. Now and then he understood a word or two of Martinez's Mexican but the other's language was still alien to him. The herder started his sheep grazing north and he and his flock went over the hill and into a coulee and were out of sight.

Martinez said, "He talks in Basque, Sam. That is not Spanish, it is not French—no man knows what the lan-

guage came from, I guess. But anyway, he says he does not know where the line is, and that is why he was on our grass."

"Another argument for a drift fence," murmured Sam.

"We could take the catch-dogs along. We could turn them into the sheep. Hola, they would move then ...them that lived to move at all!"

Sam looked back, his face thoughtful. No, they couldn't do that. No use killing innocent sheep; they didn't know they were on another outfit's graze.

They swung their broncs straight west, riding for the pass. Gradually the air grew colder, and the wind grew stronger. When they reached the point where the trail started downward, they had on their windbreakers and Martinez had tied his bandana around his ears, knotting it under his chin. The Mexican had his sombrero pulled low and rode stooped in the saddle.

And the velocity of the wind did not cease as they lost altitude; in many respects, Sam thought it became stronger and colder. For one thing, it came in windy gusts now, while on the pass it had blown steadily, not in wild bursts. Out along the breakers the fog hung in lazy tendrils that finally had to part beneath the force of the wind. But other fog came in and took its place immediately.

Old Rawhide was right. A hundred men, working night and day, couldn't patrol that shoreline. Sam wondered what kind of a roundup they could run there. And did the sun ever show through, and did the wind ever stop?

At that, Jose Martinez smiled. Yes, sometimes the weather was perfect, with a warm sun and clear sky. That would be some days in the summer, but in the winter—But look at the grass!

Grass! There was plenty of grass, good grass. Grass that stood knee-high to a bronc, that rippled under the wind. But no cattle had chewed it down, Sam remarked, and at this statement, wild anger flared in Jose Martinez's dark eyes.

"How could there be cattle here, *Senor* Sam, when they are being stolen! I have never really told old Rawhide how few head there on this range, for I would not want him to get boiling mad. He is old and his temper is terrible, and he might get killed trying to gun down Eno Reed."

Sam nodded.

"I wanted to round up these cattle, so we have some idea how many should be here, and I wanted to lay men out in the rocks, hoping to catch Eno Reed at his dirty work. But what could I do, alone?"

Sam understood. Although there were RB riders, they only worked for wages; beyond those wages, they had little interest in the *rancho*. Surely not enough to risk getting killed for the *rancho*. Sam turned in saddle, hand going to his holstered gun. A rider rode out of the brush.

SAM PULLED his hand back, for the rider was Anza Alvarez. She rode a dark sorrel, a short-barreled horse with stubby legs, a good hill horse. Her saddle was a flat-forked Spanish hull. Her coat, its collar up, was buttoned tight, but she was bareheaded, her dark hair slightly damp with the fog.

"You're a long ways from home, *Senorita* Anza," Sam said.

She smiled at them and nodded at Jose Martinez, who sat wooden-faced. "You are the same, *senores*," she said. "I ride over here with the hopes of finding one of our milk cows who strayed two days ago. She is a roan with a brand—our brand—on her, a big cow. Have you seen her?"

Jose Martinez spoke quickly. "She would not wander this direction, *hija*. She would not wander into the wind; she would go with the wind. She is on the other side of the mountain. Does your father know you are here?"

"I'm a woman, *Senor* Martinez. I'm no child any longer. I ride where I please, if you must know."

Sam held back a smile.

"I have met you over here before, *hija*. And then I told you the same as I tell you now: You are a lovely girl, and far from home. What if one of Eno Reed's hands met you here and

you were alone? They are scum from the waterfronts; they have not the respect for a woman that a saddleman has."

"I have my gun in my pocket."

The Mexican shrugged in despair. "Yes, and I have seen you try to shoot it. If they locked you in your papa's smallest barn and closed the doors and the windows, you could not even hit the wall of the barn. You would probably shoot yourself through the leg, you are that bad a shot."

Anza looked at Sam Blanding. "He makes it worse than it is, *Senor* Blanding."

"I agree with him."

She laughed a little, and Sam found himself analyzing the laugh. Although it was gay on the surface, did he detect a serious undertone to it? But Jose Martinez was right; she should not ride alone, or so far. Had she a purpose on that range? Or was she really hunting a milk cow?

"Good heavens, now it is two big men against a small woman." Her white teeth caught on her small bottom lip. "Why do you men ride in this cold weather, here on this range? You ask me questions, and now I ask you some, too."

They talked for some time longer, and Sam let his thoughts run out, trying to find out why she rode that grass. Finally he gave up, and let the errant milk cow win the point. But when the girl left, she rode toward the hacienda of her father, Sam noticed.

"Foolish *hija*," growled Martinez. "To ride alone, on this ground. What is wrong with her father and her brother?"

"Maybe they don't know she is here."

"Then they should watch her more carefully."

Sam looked back at her. "She sure is a nice girl." He did not notice Jose Matinez's smile, for the RB foreman conveniently looked the other way. "She ain't engaged to get married, is she? She doesn't wear a ring, I've noticed."

"The boys in Buenaventura and Santa Barbara, they are crazy for her," said the Mexican. "It won't be long, I think."

Sam considered that, and found no pleasure in it.

"But she doesn't give them a tumble," Martinez finished. "But a man will come along—the right man—My wife was that way. She was pretty, and she had men crazy about her—then we met—What she could see in me, a common cowhand, I don't know." The man was silent for a long moment. "Now she has been dead, all these twenty-four years—"

Sam was silent.

THEY FOUND cattle, not the amount that Sam had expected, but they were cattle, just the same. Wild as a March hare and fickle as thistledown in a wild wind. They'd turn, stare at the men, then run for the brush.

Sam said, "They'd been chased recently, I'd say."

"You notice that, too?'

When a man works with cattle all his life, he gets to understand their every mood, their responses to his presence. And these cattle were afraid of riders, deathly afraid, Why? So far, they hadn't been rounded up; some were even unbranded. They had no apparent reason to fear a man and horse so greatly. But here they were, scared and snorting, running through the chamiso like wild.

"They act like they've been handled recently," admitted Sam. He looked up at the higher ridges, running his gaze over the ledges and rills. But the fog obscured many of the rocks, and maybe no horse and riders were hidden up there, anyway.

They came across a herd of cattle, and in the herd he noticed an off-color bull—a black and gray two-year-old. Martinez told him they used the bull as a marker, much as a sheepherder used a black sheep in his flock. Sam Blanding looked at the bull, judging his weight.

"He's got big bones, and he'll make a nice hunk of beef right now. He's in good shape, too, and if we fed him some corn for a month, we'd have a good chunk of chewin' for the ranch. Come roundup, we'll pick

him up and haze him to the feed pens over at the hacienda."

"Look," said Jose Martinez.

Sam followed the man's finger that pointed toward the ground. And down there in the soft soil he saw the prints left by a shod horse. The fact that the bronc had worn shoes was enough to put him out of the wild horse class. Martinez had said a few wild broncs still roamed this range, but a wild horse didn't pack shoes.

Sam got down, knelt, and looked at the marks. They told him nothing except that the horse had been shod; the shoes bore no irregularities that would mark any particular horse. He got back in saddle and followed the tracts to where they were lost on a ledge; then he rode back to Martinez.

"Wonder how old that track is, Jose?"

The Mexican shrugged. "It is hard to tell. Maybe today, maybe a week, maybe longer. This soil is funny; it holds an imprint for a long time. Maybe it is since the last hard rain, and who knows when that was, over on this side of the mountain?"

Sam knew there was no use following the track, for it could not followed on the hard rock that the bronc had crossed. During the ride, he saw other tracks, all of shod horses. Once they jumped six head of wild horses and the horses ran off, kicking dirt behind them.

"They ain't got no shoes," growled Jose Mattinez. "Hombre, I'd like to put an *ensillado* on that big palomino stud, no?"

"You'd have a ride," acknowledged Sam.

"*Si*, but what a *caballo!*"

The afternoon was almost gone, and soon it would be dark. Their ponies were tired, leg-weary after the many mile. Still, they hit a stubborn, tough lope, heading toward the RB hacienda.

Sam rode deep in the saddle, busy with his thoughts, and Martinez rode a pace behind him, silent also. They came into the yard and turned their broncs over to the mozo and went to the house, Sam's boots pounding on the gravel walk and Martinez's moccasins without sound.

Old Rawhide met them at the door. "What'll it be first, Sam?"

"Roundup, Rawhide."

9

ANZA ALVAREZ did not return to the Alvarez hacienda. She was on that range for a purpose, and she hoped only she knew what that purpose was. She acted like she was riding for home, but when out of sight from Sam Blanding and Jose Matinez she turned toward the mountain, climbing its rocky, boulder-strewn side.

She did not follow a trail, for no trail ran up the mountain. Her pony labored against the steepness of the climb, and so she got off and walked, leading the horse. This island had been her home all her life, except for winters when she had gone to the Sisters' school in Santa Barbara, and she knew it well, for she and Miguel had ridden it from tip to tip, from shore to shore.

Because circumstances had forced the family to be always together, there on the island, each had learned to respect the other's dignity, and to rely upon the other's guidance when requested. She and her father were close, they always had been; she and Miguel, raised together, had drifted apart the last few years, more so since Eno Reed and Nick Blake had come to Santa Juanita.

At first, puzzled and a little hurt, she had tried to find out why she and her brother were drifting apart, but she had been unsuccessful. Each time Miguel drew himself into a tight, untalkative ball of silence.

The last year or two, Miguel had gone on to San Francisco a number of times, getting the stage north of Paso Robles, then taking the Southern Pacific into the bay area from there. She had thought at first that he was going north to see *Senorita* Magdalena Cortez, whom he had met while she was visiting in Santa Barbara, but later she had found that *Senorita* Cortez had married and had

gone to Colombia, America del Sur, with her husband, who was in the export trade. And still Miguel had made occasional trips to San Francisco.

One day, some two or three months before, one of the hired men had gone to Buenaventura, where he had gotten the mail. She had met him at the dock when he had sailed in, and he had been handed the mail.

She had skimmed through the letters, seated crosslegged on the dock in the sunshine, putting her letters to one side, leaving the others in the pile. There had been a letter from a San Francisco bank and she had opened it, for her father's financial affairs were the financial affairs of his family. The sum of money on depost there made her eyes blink, for she knew there was some mistake. Surely Papa did not have that much money! Had the old rascal been holding money out—?

No, he had lost his land, lost their island. That blow had hit him hard, for he was well along in years, but he had taken it with true courage. She had then looked at the name at the top of the deposit slip. And the name had not been that of Don Pablo Alvarez. The name was: Don Miguel Alvarez!

NOW SHE understood the trips Miguel had made to San Francisco, why each month around that date he had been the one to go to Buenaventura each week for the mail. This letter had come in ahead of time for some reason. But how had Miguel obtained the money?

She knew how, suddenly. The whole thing was clear. Miguel rode with Eno Reed and Nick Blake on raids against RB cattle! Where else would it come from? There was no other way he could make such great sums of money!

Should she tell Father? No, she couldn't do that. Don Pablo, proud as he was, would go wild, and Miguel also had a violent temper. She would not do that. Then how about telling her mother?

She gave up that idea, also. Dona Alvarez suffered enough; she would not suffer any more because of her son, Anza vowed.

She had walked back on the dock where the hired hand would not see her, had torn the statement into bits and thrown them into the foam that played along a pier of the dock.

Nobody would ever know, only she herself.

She had taken to watching her brother, hiding in the rocks on the hills. She had seen him meet with Eno Reed and Nick Blake, had seen them ride the rough country, turning down RB cattle so they would be close to the ocean. Always before a raid, Miguel would be cross and not quite himself. After the raid had been pulled, and the strain was over. he went back to his normal self again.

She had never really seen them load stolen cattle. But one night, when the sky had been black, she had gotten close enough to hear the raiders talk as they pushed the cattle into the boat that was moored to the rough boulders along the coast. She had heard Miguel's voice, and the voice of Eno Reed and Nick Blake; she had heard a voice she identified as that of Shane Malone. And she had been awake in her bed, lying and waiting and listening, when Miguel had come home late that nght. He had not come in the door and down the hall; he'd gone into his room though the outside window, for his room was the at the far end of the south wing of the hacinda, and he could not be seen from the bedrooms of his parents.

She had never reproached him; therefore he did not know her secret. What would he do with his share of the ill-gotten money? By this time he should have a big bank account.

She had figured that all out. When he got the limit he had set, he would leave Santa Juanita. He talked many times about going to Peru where there was still grass for a man to run cattle on, where the gringos hadn't stolen the Spanish land. For he always had looked upon the acquisition of California by the United

States as a fraudulent act, an overt steal of territory from impotent Mexico.

Anza wondered now if her father also suspected Miguel of riding with Eno Reed and Nick Blake, for she was sure her father knew RB cattle were leaving Santa Juanita, for sometimes he saddled his gray horse and rode through the hills.

SHE SETTLED down in her high rocks, her field-glasses beside her, her pony tied back out of sight. The meeting with Sam Blanding and Jose Martinez had surprised her, and fear had run over her, for Miguel was on that range, too. And if the two should find him running RB cattle

She took her glasses, fitted them and focused them, and found Blanding and Martinez, riding toward the south.

She let her vision follow the man from the Black Hills. She liked him, although she'd seen him only a few times, and she had found that like becoming greater, threatening to turn into something else. Was it possible to fall in love with a man after meeting him only or twice?

Anza blushed suddenly. "First thing you know," she told herself indignantly, "you will be letting your imagination bring you and Sam Blanding to an imaginary altar." She let her glasses leave the RB men, for they were going around the bend in a mountain. Later she saw them again, and they were more pinpoints in the distant fog, and then they were out of sight.

Below her now, down there on the mesas, riders had come out of the brush, moving into sudden activity. They had been hidden so well she had not seen them, and she had eyes trained to the range. She had some sandwiches in her saddle-bags and she ate these, watching the men working cattle below her.

She did not need her glasses to identify them. One was Eno Reed, big in leather, another was Nick Blake; three were Reed riders, their names unknown to her, and the other was Miguel.

She watched her brother turn the cattle down, and she saw there were not many RB cattle there. What there were were wild and hard to handle, for they had been run many times, and were spooky.

Migul was a good rider. His bronc turned sharply, headed a cow, then moved in, and she saw his bullwhip rise and snap. The cow ran wildly and got into a bunch with three other cows and traveled down a gully to where one of the Reed men had bunched a small herd.

There in the pinons, they would evidently hold the cattle. She let her gaze run beyond the stock to the sea, and she looked for some time at the small cove almost encircled by rocks. A boat could pull in there, sheltered by the rocks, run out its loading planks, and take a load of cattle.

She got her horse and turned toward home, for the afternoon was almost through. She went over the mountain and to its east side, and there the sun was shining, although it held no warmth, due to its lowness. She took her time, and when she got home, Miguel was standing in the doorway of the barn.

"You look cold, *hermana.*"

She got down and he took her horse and unsaddled him. "Turn him into pasture," she said, "for I won't need him until tomorrow, if I go riding then."

"He is tired," he said. He looked at her sharply. "You have been to the RB, huh?"

"Yes, I was there," she lied.

"To see Sam Blanding?" He teased her.

"Oh, yes, *si,* to see *Senor* Blanding. I talked with Rawhide Hinton, and he is getting better. When I was ready to leave, *Senor* Blanding rode in with Jose Martinez. They are going to stretch a drift fence, I think. Either that, or round up cattle on the west side of the island."

He was thoughtful. "That would be a hard job," he said. "The cattle are wild, *hermana.*"

They went to the house together.

10

THEY LEFT two riders with the cattle, and then they went to the sheep ranch's headquarters. They came down and unsaddled, the cowpuncher going to the mess shack, and Reed and Blake going to the hacienda, where Shanghai had white linen on the table. The linen's clean surface was marked by the bright pottery and the sheen of polished silver.

They came out of the raw wild wind into the warm room, and the fireplace, red with leaping fire, invited them over. Shanghai came in, carrying a whiskey bottle and two glasses on a hand-carved wooden tray made in Mexico City.

"Likee dlink, Missy Bloss? Something to warm the belly, *Senor* Blake?"

Each took a glass. The Chinaman left the tray on a desk and returned to his kitchen. They drank.

"To fat cattle," said Eno Reed.

Blake was silent, too silent.

Reed asked, "What's on your mind, friend?"

Blake spoke slowly. "Some of these nights, there'll be guns a-talkin', an' hell'll know what is ahead. Some of these nights, we'll ride into it. With Sam Blanding roddin' ol' Rawhide's iron—"

"He's only one man."

"Only take one bullet to kill a man, too. Only takes one man to pull a trigger."

Behind them, shadows grouped, broke apart, danced a macabre dance against the dark adobe wall. Outside, the wind sung in the eves, a humming sound without beginning or end.

"Fatalism," murmured Reed. "Bad for a man, Blake. Well, let's put this chuck away, for the night'll be dark and long."

"They always are," said Blake.

Reed saw that his foreman was wrapped in a bitter cloak of meditation, and he made no words that would attempt to rip it from him. A moody man himself, many times he forced himself to be light, and now he fully appreciated Blake's point of view. But what of death? Let it ride with you and mock you, and what can you do? Every move you make, every thought you think, can be touched by death, if you allow it. Who knows when a man's heart will stop or his veins turn cold? Nobody. So why worry about it, Nick Blake?

They ate the finely cooked meal and, their re-past finished, they found chairs before the fire and stretched their boots out in front of them. Shanghai was clearing the table, singing some sing-song Chinese song, and Blake looked at him sourly. But Reed liked the song, and he was glad when Blake locked himself back into silence again.

"What's that about, Shanghai?"

"What ablout, Missy Reed?"

"The song."

The Chinese stood with an armful of dirty dishes, trying to think hard. "I can tell in Cantonese," he said. "But in English, is another matter. Maybe it go this way.

"A man go through forest, and when he start the morning bright, and sun warm. By noon, sun too hot; man tired and want evening to come. Hot afternoon go by slow, the evening finally come, darkness catch him in forest, and afraid of night, he get lost, he figure.

"Man, he no know what ahead, that is why he scared, Missy Reed. Now he want heat of noon. The forest is path of life, and the day is man's lifetime—in the morning, he is young; at noon, he afraid, for he not know what is ahead."

Reed nodded.

Blake stirred, spurs clanging. "That's it, Reed. If we all knew there was something good after death, we'd all commit suicide to get this over with. But we're afraid, because we are sure of the present, of this world, but inside we all doubt if there is anything after death."

Reed was silent.

THEY GOT from their chairs, men bound with purpose, and Reed pulled a drawer out, getting some cartridges. He put these in his windbreaker tight, and followed Nick Blake outside. They went toward the

barn, the wind pulling against them, and there in the windbreak of the building a cigarette glowed its tip red and evil in the night.

The red coal rose as a man got to his feet. It fell to the ground and a boot heel killed it. The cowpuncher said, "I've got the broncs saddled, men. Been waitin' for you."

Reed glanced down and saw the cigarette was out. They went into the barn that was lighted by the lantern hung to a beam, a flickering light fed by whale-oil. They led saddled horses from stalls, found their stirrups, and rode out the front door.

The night was dark, whipped by alien winds, and Reed knew the swift feeling of loneliness a man feels under a black, windy sky. He remembered the fire, burning and unused, back in the big living room with the native oak beams, their sides still marred by the flat bit of the axes that had felled them and peeled them. Suddenly he wished he were beside it.

They followed a trail that ran always south, skirting the west side of Santa Juanita. They followed it through catclaw and mesquite, followed it more by rote than by sight. Juniper trees bent as the wind whistled through their always green branches.

"Miguel," said the cowpuncher. "He should meet us along here."

Reed did not answer; neither did Blake. A rider came in with "Miguel Alvarez," and he fell into pace beside Reed, keeping Blake even with him and between himself and Eno Reed.

"The devil's own night," Reed said, and the wind whipped the words away. "We'll have the range to ourselves."

"That's good," stated Miguel.

Blake shifted in leather, put his right hand down on the horn. "Wind, more wind." He might have been talking to himself. "For the sake of a lousy peso—for a stolen dollar—you ride out on a night like this. Listen to it howl, and pity yourself in your ignorance."

Reed said, "You should have been on the stage."

"A Concord stage," said the cowpuncher.

Blake laughed and Reed laughed, but Miguel Alvarez was silent. They covered ground fast, the wind pushing against them, and at midnight they came to the herd. The two men had the cattle bunched in the junipers. The cattle were tired, for they'd been moved a long distance and had covered it fast, and they were bunched and silent, standing together to break the wind.

"Shane Malone?" asked Reed.

A cowboy said, "The boat is in," and they started toward the rocks. They worked them with low grunts, and the bullwhips talked. They came to the rocks, and the wind died, for the high boulders along the waterline broke the wind. Shane Malone was on a rock, looking out over the cattle.

"This way, buckos, and work them fast. For by morning, we'll be out in the channel, and they'll be sharpenin' their skinnin' knives in ol' Frisco. You out there, Eno Reed?"

"Hell, no," growled Reed.

"An' you, Nick Blake?"

"The damn' fool!" Nick Blake spat the words. "He must be drunk! Standin' up on that rock an' hollering like that. What if there were ears around to hear him?"

THE CATTLE were moving up the gangplank, going into the ship. A steer had started them in; the others followed. Blake and Miguel Alvarez were working the back of the diminishing herd.

"Who t'hell talked to you, greaser?"

The *greaser* did it. For a long time, Miguel Alvarez had sensed the arrogant pride of the man, for he was a native Texan, and therefore he held Mexicans, regardless of education and status, inferior. Miguel Alvarez's gun rose and chopped down, then came down again.

The second blow knocked Nick Blake from his horse. The first had stunned him, but he had reached for his gun, and the second dropped him from leather. Miguel Alvarez had left his horse now, and he sat his gun against Nick Blake's high ribs as Blake sat there.

"You'll apologize for that word, Blake?"

Blake had a moment of wild, red anger. Evidently nobody had seen their little drama, for the night was dark and the others were some distance away, working the cattle up the gangplank. Then discretion came in and held Blake, giving him a moment of clarity.

"You draw fast, Alvarez, but there'll come a time.."

"We'll wait for that time," purred Miguel Alvarez. "But now, I want to hear you say something Blake. What do you say?"

Blake said, "Sorry, fellow. Guess my nerves are jumpy."

When Eno Reed rode back, both men were in saddles, hazing cattle. Reed snapped, "Come on, men, pronto! Get 'em on board! Get them out of sight!"

"You sound worried," stated Miguel.

Reed had no answer. Finally the last of the RB cattle went on the ship. Malone said, "Good work, an' I'll see you next week," and the gangplank came in. They heard the lap of water around the sailboat's prow and then the ship was moving, a dark object in the dark night, leaving behind it the sound of water on the rocks. It moved into the darkness and became lost.

They sat their horses and watched. Finally Reed said, "Damn, I hate to leave these rocks; they break the wind good."

It was warm there. No wind to hit them, just the sound of the water. They sat their saddles for a few minutes, and were silent. Now and then a man moved in saddle, and stirrup leathers creaked, and one bronc rolled the cricket in his bit. The sound was musical.

"Well, home to sougans," murmured Reed.

They left the rocks at a hard, quick lope. Their ponies knew they were heading home and this gave the saddlers added impetus. Again Reed headed them, big in leather, and his men trailed behind, silent and morose.

And Miguel Alvarez, as he rode, saw that Nick Blake never got behind him. Nobody but he and Blake knew of their run-in back there in the rocks. He realized Blake would never forget it.

He thought: *I should've killed him.*

11

THE RB OUTFIT pulled its roundup wagon out at dawn. And despite the protests of Sam Blanding and Martinez, old Rawhide Hinton rode on the bed-wagon with the nighthawk, cursing Sam and Jose for trying to make him stay at home.

"I'm well, you idiots, an' I can prove it. Look, I can walk, see!"

He hobbled a few feet, all bent over.

Rawhide did not see Sam wink at Martinez. "You lose somethin', Rawhide?"

Rawhide studied him. "What'd you mean by that? Of course I ain't lost nothin', unless it was my good sense when I asked you to come here! Explain yourself, younker."

"You walk all bent over like you was looking for something," explained Sam grinning.

Rawhide Hinton snorted like a bronc with distemper, almost swallowing his big chew of native, raw tobacco which he grew in the garden. Sam had gone over to where the men were bunching the remuda. He let his gaze run over the saddle-horses. Not tip-top stock, but some short-legged, thick-barreled broncs..they could handle themselves good on steep slants, and the west side of Santa Juanita was tough and tough on horseflesh.

"They'll do," he told a cowboy. "They've got some fat on them, but we'll get rid of that pronto. One day's ride will gaunt them down to muscle."

They had a small crew and not much territory to work, so they did not take out a special mess-wagon; they made the one wagon act as a chuck-wagon and a bed-wagon, both.

The squaw and a Mexican kid, a waif that Rawhide had once picked up on the docks in San Diego, were to stay at the home ranch. They also left the old mozo behind, and he stood

in the barn doorway when the outfit statrted rolling, leaning on his manure fork and evidently thinking of the days when he also had headed out on roundup, young and tough in his saddle.

Sam lifted his hand to him.

"Ride a tough piece of leather," the old mozo yelled. "An' watch out for ol' Rawhide, 'cause he might get some ideas he's a man again, out with your roundup. Watch that he don't sprain his wrist pickin' up a cup of coffee!"

Rawhide grinned and shook a fist at him.

THEY REACHED the southern tip of Santa Juanita by ten o'clock, and then they started to work back. By this time the wild edges had been taken from their saddlestock and the dogs had also calmed down and were trotting behind horses with tongues lopping. They rounded the tip of the southern-most peak of the island, and the clear waters of the Pacific stretched to the east, coming in with whitecaps to lap against the rocks and the short stretches of beach.

For once, the wind wasn't blowing. The sea was calm and the air was still, the sun warm; Sam caught himself remembering the snow that would cover the Black Hills at that time of the year. He said: "We split up and work cattle to the north. The wagon should be in that gully about one or two, and we come in for chuck then. These cattle aren't really fat, for they get poor climbing these hills. Push them hard and tire them."

"That's the system," grunted Jose Martinez. "Then when night comes, we can hold them in a box canyon. And they will be tired, and they will bed down. All right, vaqueros, hit the stirrups!"

Each man took two dogs with him. The dogs had worked in pairs since puppyhood, and they knew what their job was, and they liked their work. Two ugly mutts, a dull gray dog and a dark brown hound, went with Sam. He had never before worked cattle with dogs, so this was something new for him.

Jose Martinez and Sam watched the riders head out. And the Mexican murmured, "A lot of soil to cover and not enough riders, Sam. But there are not many cattle," He shook his dark head slowly. "Old Rawhide, he will be mad when he sees this small gather, he will."

Sam's lips were hard. "Well, we'll know for sure in a few days, huh?" He loped to the east, his dogs following him. He got back on the ridges, high on the watershed that formed the island's backbone, and went to work. Here were wild junper and thick manzanita and chamiso, and it grew tight to the mountain. Cattle had formed trails through it as they had headed for water-holes and Sam found the biggest one of these. He had a solid piece of leather across the neck and shoulders of his bronc, and this turned the stiff thorns of catclaw. He had also put *tapideros* on his stirrups to turn the thorns, and he knew that his leather chaps would protect his legs.

The dogs were wise, and they left the main trail, branching off on side-trails. They worked in a pair. Somewhere Sam heard a bull bawl in pain and ahead of him two cows, two calves, and a bull broke in on the trail, the dogs behind them. Even as Sam watched, one dog leaped high, snagged the bull by the tail, and swung on it, somehow missing the bull's kicking hind feet. The bull, maddened by pain, turned to hook him, horns bobbing wickedly. But the other dog snarled in, snapped the bull on the nose, and the first dog, now on the ground, cut in on the bull's hind legs. The bull had enough; his fight left him. Bawling, he ran down the trail, the dogs following him.

Sam called the dogs off and they trotted back, tongues dropping. He waved them into the brush and they trotted off, looking for more stock. They could go where there was no trail, for they were so low they could travel under the branches of the manzanita. All Sam had to do was ride the high ridges and turn cattle downward after the catch-dogs ran them out.

FROM THAT high point, he had a good view of his crew below him. The day was clear and he did

not wear his windbreaker; he had on a buckskin jacket he'd gotten from a Mandan Sioux squaw, over on the Missouri River out of Bismark, in North Dakota territory. He had his old bullwhip and he made this talk, scaring the wild stock by the series of shotgun-like reports that the bullwhip's rawhide tip blasted into the air.

He felt good. For one thing, he was in his saddle, and that saddle was on a good, tough cayuse. He was working cattle, a cowman's job. The sun was warm and old Rawhide was getting well and he himself was fitting into the RB iron. The vaqueros evidently liked him and they were a congenial, loyal lot. A good range, wild cattle, good catch-dogs, tough broncs, and his own iron..what more could a saddleman ask?

Two cows jumped out of the brush, and Sam's bronc automatically turned them down the trail. The dogs were growling back in the manzanita, evidently fighting it out with a tough cow or bull. Sam heard the crash of brush as their prey broke away and ran with them nipping him.

Four miles or so ahead of him, he saw the combined mess and bedwagon, coming down off a hill into a basin. The wagon had cut through a pass north of where Sam and his men had started their gather.

Cattle were coming out of the brush below him. They were moving down arroyos and coulees, heading toward the bottom land where the wagon would soon be pitched. That part of the range drained down into this basin, and the cattle were drifting with the flow of the land.

The dogs came out of the brush, snapping at a surly red heifer, who lowered her horns and charged Sam's bronc. But the cayuse, trained to the ways of wild cattle, moved to one side. Sam's bullwhip came down, almost wrapping itself around the heifer's barrel, and the cow had enough. She loped down the trail toward a small herd of steers and cows, grazing on a mesa for a bite or two of the tall grass before going down to lower ground.

Jose Martinez, on some rocks below, lifted his hand, and Sam waved his hat in return. Some of the stock was already down on the bottom land where the wagon was. Others riders were coming closer, working toward the wagon. Sam studied the cattle they had gathered and saw it wasn't much over a hundred head. Martinez was right. Reed must've been stealing RB cattle on that side of Santa Juanita. Or else pirates were coming, working that range during the nights, then loading their gather on boats and leaving by the rise of the sun.

THE SUN was at noon height when Sam and his dogs came into camp. All except Martinez were in. The wagon had been moved to the west end of the arroyo where it blocked the narrow creek that wound toward the ocean, going down a steep canyon to the rocks along the shoreline. With a rider statoned in the east end of the canyon, they could hold the herd easily with a rider to a shift for night-guard.

Sam skirted the herd, looking at the stock with an appraising eye. Scrub beef, with not much meat or blood, but steaks just the same in San Francisco or Los Angeles, or San Diego. Better beef was raised in the Black Hills, but there a cow didn't have to be built like a deer to travel the country.

Most of them had long, wicked horns, evidently dating back to the early days of the Californios, when cattle came up from Old Mexico and long-horns trekked in the Lone Star state. They were winded and tired from their run, but their fight was still in them. They shook their horns and pawed the ground and snorted. But the dogs paid them no attention. They trotted behind Sam's bronc, winded themselves, and hungry.

Old Rawhide was hobbling around, doing the cooking. He had two kettles hung over small fires and Sam knew the sweet smell of boiling beef and spuds and hot coffee. He was hungrier than he'd thought.

The nighthawk had the cavvy out in the clearing. He had already built his rope-corral, using one side of the

wagon as a side to the corral. He had looped his one-inch ropes around the hubs of the front and rear wheels to anchor them.

"Well, see you're still alive, younker." Rawhide stirred a kettle and studied Sam, who was unsaddling. "Figured mebbe these rough slants were too much for a Black Hill scissorbill an' he might get dehorned."

"You mean dehorsed, don't you?"

"What difference does it make? Where in hell is our cows, son? This cain't be all the gather that's hid back in thet bresh, be she?"

"Maybe somebody's beat us to them," ventured Sam.

At that, the old rawhider cursed Eno Reed and Nick Blake, using a vocabulary that was the results of years of trail and saddle. Sam got a tin plate, speared some meat, and settled down, a hunk of bread on his plate and a cup of coffee beside him.

Martinez rode in, stripped his horse, got his chuck and sat cross-legged, his plate on his lap. "Not many of them, no?" He shook his head dismally.

"Not many" agreed Sam. His meal finished, he got up and slid his hardware into the small barrel beside the wagon. The barrel was half full of water. He stood and looked at the herd, eyes speculative, and then he beckoned to the nighthawk, who drove the cavvy into the rope-corral.

Sam tied the rope tight across the opening. The saddle-horses, used to a rope corral, made no move to jump the rope for freedom. They were tame horses and ropes were not necessary to catch them. The riders walked into the corral and caught their horses by walking up to them.

Broncs saddled, they held a brief meeting. Sam talked in low tones. They would swing back south again, leaving the wagon in that spot for the night, and they'd work the same country again, trying to get more cattle out of the brush. Maybe they had missed some, for the brush was awfully thick.

Martinez ahook his head, "Not many left, Sam, if any. These dogs, they work the brush good..they know their business. But we try again."

12

WHEN YOUNG Miguel Alvarez rode into the barn, he was in a dark, bitter mood. The night, its excitements, its tension, had rubbed against him like emery, driving him to a youthful bitterness. He rode in the back door of the big barn, so that nobody would see him from the hacienda.

He pulled the latigo strap out of the saddle-ring, hung the kak on a peg, and slipped a halter on his bronc, putting his silver bridle over his saddle. The mozo had left the manger full of hay and there was oats in the bucket at the end of the manger.

The young don hunkered, lit a cigarette, and smoked it down, waiting for his horse to cool. When the sweat on the animal was dry, he took a sack from a hook. He wiped the horse carefully, working from his head back to hs rump, wiping off the loose hair and dried sweat.

This done, he curried the horse, working slowly. Some of the unrest left him and clarity took command of his thoughts. He had best make a break out of that country, he had best leave the island....He had the amount he needed and each time these raids were becoming more dangerous. And a dead man can't run a cow spread down in America del Sur under the shadows of the high, snow-tipped Andes!

But how would he make the break? He had his father and mother and Anza....Face grim, he worked, battling his problem. There seemed only one obvious way. Go to them, tell them he was leaving; he would tell them he could see no opportunity here, and he was going where there was opportunity. He would write to them, of course, and perhaps some day they would come to his hacienda?

No, they would never come. His father and mother would never leave Santa Juanita. They were elderly and this was their home, and they would never leave. And as for Anza..she would marry soon; that was only logical and natural. No, he would talk

to them, tell them he wanted to go, and they would have to let him leave. Of course, they would be sorry, but a man has his own trail to ride, his own life to control....

He had no use for gringos. The fact that his start would come from money he'd received for stolen cattle had no visible effect on him. From his point of view, the gringos had stolen his father's lands and cattle, although they had done it through subtle means..by governmental decree when they had taken California from Mexico, by their banks and their loan companies. He had his own point of view on the matter, although his father.. *Dios* bless him!..had an altogether different viewpoint.

No, he'd make one more raid. And that, he vowed, would be the last. His thought went to Nick Blake. Should he make another raid with Blake and Reed? Blake might send a bullet through his back....

THE BLANKETS were warm and friendly. The peons had woven them from the wool of sheep from the rancho. Sleep was slow to come; he was playing a wild, reckless game; it had to end soon..either in gunplay some dark night when cattle moved in the brush, or else by his withdrawal. It would end either way. He had quite a bankroll, although perhaps it wasn't enough. But when did any man get enough money? Maybe every man was greedy....

He did not remember sleep coming, but the next thing he knew Anza was knocking at his door. "Do you stay in bed all morning, lazy one?"

He glanced at the clock. The hands pointed almost to nine. "Go away, ugly duckling. Do you always bother people?"

"You'll get no breakfast, *hijo,* if you don't get up."

He yawned, *"Esta bien,"* and got out of bed. He dressed and pulled on new boots, for the ride had dirtied his others. He let water run from the tap into the basin made of natural stone hollowed out by chisels in the hands of stone masons. The water was cold, for it came from the spring back on the mountain, running through wooden pipes into the house for distribution. He splashed in it, washed well and then studied himself in the mirror. His eyes showed tiredness, but maybe they would not notice.

His father and mother had finished breakfast. Don Pablo was in his study and his *dona* was working in the garden. Anza had fried bacon, taken from the sides of wild hogs shot back on the mesa, and cured by the peons in their vats. She had toast for him and black coffee and gruel cooked in a pan brought from Mexico City.

"Your bacon is cold, hijo. Your toast has no heat in it. Even the porridge is not warm. Why do you stay so long between covers, lazy one?"

He found himself smiling. He would miss her banter and goading, he realized, and he did not relish that thought.

"I am an old man; I am tired."

"Oh, so that is what makes you sleepy, no? You are old?"

He looked at her suddenly, sensing something underlying her words. Did she hide some inner meaning in the words? Ah, your imagination is like a wild horse, he told himself; it runs with its tail up and with clattering wild hoofs. You imagine too many things for your own good.

"You still chase the gringo." he asked.

She was putting a stick of red manzanita in the cookstove. She dropped the lid with. "Oh, I always burn my fingers," and sucked her thumb, and he remembered her suddenly as a little girl. "What did you say?"

He forced a laugh. "I mention the gringo, and you forget yourself, and you burn yourself!"

"The gringo? Who do you mean?"

"*Senor* Blanding, of course. Do not play so dumb, my sister. Ah, I have seen it in your eyes. The look is there, like when a year ago you looked at Rudolpho Gomez y Vega."

She tried to keep from blushing. "Cannot a girl look at a man without her brother teasing her? How about you and Maria?"

"Maria? Maria who?"

"Lopez, of course."

He made a grandiose gesture, the movement showing a young man's disregard for women. "Ah, she is

nothing to me. In my life, there will be a procession of Maria Lopez's, one after the other."

"Then you had better leave Santa Juanita," Anza said. "Because you will run out of girls on the mainland; they are wise to your smooth tongue and strong lies. They'll have nothing to do with you."

He kept his eyes on his breakfast. "Maybe I will leave, *hermana*. There is little left here for me, with the gringos crowding us into the sea."

"Gringo! I hate that name!"

He held his tongue in time. Instead he said, "Let's not go into that, Anza." His meal completed, he shoved back his chair. "Hurry with the dinner, for I go to take a long nap. Don't forget to call me."

HE WENT outside, but he did not go out to sleep in the bunkhouse. He went to where his mother hoed in the garden. "Is there not a peon who can do this work?" he asked. "Do you have to break your back over a hoe?"

"Hush," his mother reproved him. "I like work."

"I don't," he said.

"The young never do. And I do not blame them; youth is the time for play, for one grows old too soon. Did I hear you wrangling with your sister?"

"She started it."

"*Si*, all the time you say, 'She started it.'" Dona Alvarez hacked at a stubborn weed, hoe flashing in the sun.

Don Miguel opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. He had been going to tell her he was ready to leave Santa Juanita. But suddenly he knew he couldn't tell her. He was her only son....No, he couldn't tell her. What, then, would he do?

He'd leave and then write to her and his father. *Si*, that was the way to do it. Already he had most of his clothes in Buenaventura. Each time he had gone to the mainland he had taken some clothing along, getting ready for his departure. Now they were awaiting him at the home of a friend.

He looked at his mother, at the garden, at the hacienda, and then at the rough, black mountain in the background. He would miss them all, even the mountain. He went back into the house and down the cool hall with the pictures of his ancestors on the adobe wall. Were they scowling at him? They regarded him sternly, it seemed, from their golden frames.

His father looked up from his manuscript. "So you finally got up, huh, son? What do you do today?"

"I'm going to the mainland."

Shrewd eyes watched him through the glasses. "Another girl, huh? *Si*, I was the same way when I was young; I am glad the spirit died in me. When you come back, bring me some tobacco, will you? Don Carlos will have it in his tenda for me."

Miguel promised he would. But he knew, now more than ever, that he would not bring it back..he would have Don Carlos dispatch it with the man who took him to the mainland. He went to his room, where he started packing his suitcase.

Ten minutes later, Anza slipped into his room, closing the door behind her. He looked at her with a scowl. "Is it so a man cannot dress in his own room without a girl crowding in on him? What do you want?"

"Father says you are going to Buenaventura."

"I am. What is so odd in that?"

"Maria Lopez is not in Buenaventura. She is visiting her aunt in San Diego. She is two hundred miles away."

"Did I say I go to see Maria? Surely she is not the only woman in the world. What is the matter with you?"

Her face was pale, its lightness accentuated by her dark hair. Her dark eyes were on him with a slow penetration, and her teeth were white against her bottom lip. Her voice trembled.

"You are leaving us, *hermano*. I know that. You are leaving us without telling Papa or Mama."

He was cold inside. He heard his voice asking, "What do you mean? For the sake of *Dios*, what do you mean, *hermana*?"

SHE HAD backed up against the the door, and her hands were be-

hind her on the rough, steel knob, hand made in a forge at the hacienda. "I should not say this, Miguel. I should let you go. For months, I have gone with you to Buenaventura, and I have seen you carry your clothes out, a suitcase full at a time. Now you are going for good. I know you are!" Her voice rose a little.

"Why should I leave?"

She found herself telling him about the bank statement she had inadvertently opened, and how she had watched him go on raids with Eno Reed and Nick Blake. "And last night, I saw you come home. I couldn't sleep. I worried about you. A gun could talk, a horse could slip..you would be dead! Maybe it is best that you do go. *Si,* I know it is best!"

He stood silent, a serape in one hand, the other hand limp at his side. Later, he remembered holding the serape and folding it. The silk was smooth to his touch, his mouth without taste or feeling.

"And you knew all this time? You ..you spied on me?"

"No, I didn't spy. I opened that letter by accident. Had I noticed it was for you, I'd never have opened it. And I haven't spied. I've had fear in my heart for you and I could not sleep when you were out on a raid!"

"And what are you going to do, Anza?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you going to tell Mother or Father?"

She shook her head. "No. You haven't told them you are leaving?"

He looked at the serape, although not interested in it, and his face was blank with sorrow, a numb animal sorrow. "No, I cannot tell them I am leaving. I just cannot. I tried but I.. Father does not know, does he?"

"Not that I know of."

He considered that gravely. "No, he does not know. For if he did he would have talked to me before now. He would be violently angry. I wonder if he would try to kill me?"

"He'd make you leave."

"Then I did best by not telling them." He put the serape in a suitcase and pulled the straps shut. "You will tell the mozo to get a team harnessed to the rig, and a man to take the boat to Buenaventura with me, for somebody will have to take it back. Are you going with me?"

"No."

"That is just as well. It is not good to drag one's departure out too long, *hermana.* You will go with me to the dock, won't you? You can drive the team back."

She was silent.

"You will do that, won't you, Esperanza?"

She noticed that he called her by her full name, a habit he had in times of stress. My name, she thought, means faith; maybe he has faith in me. *Si,* and it means hope, which is better than faith. She stood and thought: Which is the stronger, hope or faith? Why did she think of that?

"Will you go that far with me?"

"*Si,* brother."

13

THAT AFTERNOON the RB riders re-rode the range they had worked in the morning. And the prophecy of old Jose Martinez proved correct: they found only a few more head of RB cattle, overlooked by the dogs and the riders in the morning gather. And these cows were wild.

Sam Blanding had worked wild cattle before, combing the stock out of the Missouri River brakes, out of the foothills of the Black Hills, but he had never seen stock so wild. They'd see a man and his bronc; they'd whirl and snort and rip into the brush; they'd leap over fallen trees like a deer leaps. And the dogs, seeing them, would hit out in pursuit, sneaking through the manzanita.

A man couldn't follow the cattle through the thick brush. Sam got on a high ridge and watched his dogs work the cows. There were three in the bunch, all having big calves, and the dogs worked them out into the open, where one cow wheeled to fight, horns lowered.

One dog, wise to ringy cattle, went in for the heels, then checked his stride as the cow pivoted to face him. The dog ran by, and the cow follow-

ed, charging him. That was the other dog's cue. This dog came in on the cow's hamstrings, snarling and biting, and buried his teeth in her shin-bone, snapping like a mad Yucatan turtle. The cow, finding one of her enemies on her, turned, and as she did so the other dog came in. He leaped and got her right ear, almost throwing her. The cow went to her knees, bawled, then shook him loose to gallop after the rest of the herd, her fight taken out of her.

Behind her trotted the catch-dogs, tongues out, as they took it easy and caught their wind again. Sam cut in behind the three cows, his bullwhip popping, and they ran over the ridge, going to where eight head of steers, bulls and cows, with two calves, were down on the mesa below them.

Jose Martinez had driven the eight head into that clearing. He waved at Sam, who waved back. Sam ducked back over the ridge, following a trail through the brush. A catclaw snapped across the back of his hand, draggng its sharp claws across his skin and cutting his knuckles.

He rubbed his hand and grinned slowly. Hell of a country, where a man had to wear gloves so's not to get his hands ripped to pieces. His dogs struck off on a fresh scent and soon, somewhere in the deep chamiso, he heard them yipping.

They ran the cougar down the trail, heading toward him. The big cat saw him then, and jumped into the brush. Sam shot at that moment, his .45 roaring. But the distance had been quite a way for six-shooter work and he doubted if he had this cat. He had also led the animal some distance, shooting ahead of him, for he was afraid he might hit a dog.

His horse, the scent of the cougar strong in his nostrils, reared and whinnied. Sam pulled him down and curbed him, listening to the dogs. He wondered if they would jump the cougar and fight him, then decided they had more brains than that. Cougars were pretty plentiful there, huh?

The barking receded, and Sam saw the dogs at the base of a rocky outcropping, smelling along the talus cones. Evidently the cougar had outmaneuvered them and gotten into the rocks. The dogs might hit his scent again, but they'd never catch the big cat, for he was on his home range, up there in the rocks.

Sam called the dogs back. He scolded them or running the cougar and they lay down, tongues hanging and flanks heaving. One had a torn jaw and Sam figured he had made contact with one of the cougar's claws. He dismounted and got the beast by the neck. He laid him on his side and looked at the wound.

A RIDER rode into the clearing. Sam did not look up, expecting the rider to be Jose Martinez, for the Mexican had been working toward him, Sam had noticed,. Therefore he was rather surpised to hear a woman say, "Is he hurt bad, *senor?*"

Sam turned the dog loose. He rubbed his hands on his chaps. "Now think about an angel, and she comes down on horseback. I'm mighty glad to see you, Miss Anza. But what brings you out here in the rough country all by yourself?"

"My father and I rode over. Papa is at your camp, discussing astronomy with *Senor* Hinton."

"A s t r o n o m y?" Sam frowned. "That's about stars and the moon ain't it? What does ol' Rawhide know about that?"

"He studies a lot about stars. Didn't you know that?'

"Heck," grinned Sam. "I never even knew the old bugger could read."

She smiled. "Certainly he can read."

The dog trotted off and smelled noses with his companion; then they both went into the brush. Sam found his strirup and went into the saddle.

"You have not found many cattle, no?"

Sam scowled. "Not many, Miss Anza. But we've found lots of hoofmarks of shod horses that have covered this territory."

She nodded, understandng what he meant. A shod bronc had a rider, for range horses were barefooted, and riders meant cattle had been going off Santa Juanita. They got on a lofty ridge that overlooked the Pacific.

The sky held no clouds and in the

distance would be seen the other channel islands, San Miguel, San Clemente, and Santa Barbara. To the south could be seen the blue outline of Santa Catalina. They were blue marks, dim and uncertain, against the clear horizon. Their beauty gripped Sam.

Anza was also held by their fragile beauty. And Sam Blanding, strangely, found himself comparing their cold beauty with the warm personality of the girl, And he smiled softly.

"What do you smile at, *senor?*"

"My thoughts." Sam looked at her. Their eyes held for a moment, and she looked away.

"Come, we had better chase out cattle, not look at the scenery."

She rode down the slant, horse braced against the loose shale, and Sam came behnd, the gravity pulling him against the fork of his saddle. Below them the dogs were barking, and a lone cow and her calf came running out of the brush. They started up the slope and Sam and Anza turned them back.

She rode a good cutting-pony, Sam saw and she could sit with a saddle. She turned the cow while Sam took the calf, and the dogs did the rest. Jose Martinez came out of the buckbrush, his pony lathered. He nodded to Anza, his dark face showing a brief smile.

"No cows," he told Sam. "We got them all this morning, no?"

"Looks that way, Jose."

"We work north, Sam?"

SAM said they might just as well; there was little, if any use in reriding that territory. Anza said she would help them. The three of them spent the rest of the afternoon running cattle down from the hills.

There they found more cattle. But Sam noticed they were deadly afraid of a horse and rider, and he got the impression they had been run recently by horsemen. Always he kept his eyes open for a possible place where cattle can be loaded onto a boat, and he found a number of such places.

One spot showed cattle had been bunched on it recently, for the hoof marks were plain. The boat had tied in close to the rocks and laid down a gangplank and loaded the stolen stock.

Anger boiled in the man from the Black Hills. Surely there must be some way to stop this rustling? But what way would it be. . .unless by gun-talk? That would stop it once and for all. He looked at Anza. "There goes a boat out of Reed dock toward Buenaventura. See it?"

The sail was white in the distance, like a white ash on the blue sea.

"I saw a boat leave your dock a while ago," he said.

"My brother. He goes to the mainland." She was looking at the boat, and he thought he saw anxiety in her eyes. And why? Surely he must be reading them wrong. "That is the Reed boat, and it is going to Buenaventura, too, not north to Santa Barbara."

"Hope it sinks, an' Reed an' Blake drown," growled Sam, grinning.

She was silent.

Sam reined his horse around. "Cattle waitin' for us, Miss Anza. Yonder's ol' Jose, an' he's hazing along a few head."

"*Senor* Sam—"

He looked at her, waited, but she was silent. So he asked, "Yes?"

"I was going to tell you something. But I guess I had best keep it to myself." There was no humor in her smile.

Sam glanced sharply at her. He had detected a nervousness in her, but he had made no mention of it. He had the impression she had been going to tell him something important, and at the last moment had changed her mind.

"Well, it'll keep, won't it, Miss Anza?"

"Maybe later." Her smile was shy.

Just then the catch-dogs ran a cow and twin calves out of the chamiso. Sam fed his pony the spurs, turning him and driving him ahead to turn the cow. Anza came in behind, the free end of her riata talking, and the lariat whammed into the cow, making her jump ahead. They whooped her and the calves down the dim trail, whipping and scaring her.

She hit the flat, met two steers run

out by Jose Martinez, and the five of them went galloping down the trail, the calves following as fast as they could run. One of Sam's dogs started after a calf.

"Come here!" ordered Sam. 'Don't run that calf; you'll kill him! Come here, I tell you!"

The dog stopped and trotted back. Sam let them have a moment's rest, then put them into the brush again. The dogs were getting tired. For one thing, the day had been exceptionally warm, and they had done a lot of work. They went into the brush reluctantly.

THERE WAS no more twilight on that side of the island, for the sun was not cut off by the peaks, as it was at the home ranch. But even with this aid the range grew dark early, for the days were short. When Sam and Anza rode into camp Don Pablo was sitting cross-legged by the fire, eating supper.

Sam and the girl got down, and Sam turned his bronc over to the nighthawk, who unsaddled him. The nighthawk had night-horses picketed on the mesa for the cowboys to ride at night-guard.

All of the riders were in but Jose Martinez, and the foreman rode up while Sam was getting tin plates for himself and Anza. The foreman ran a speculative eye over the herd, and smiled at old Rawhide.

"Well, we got some cattle for you, ancient."

"Not many, though," growled Rawhide. "An' where do you get this 'ancient' stuff, my friend? Fact is, I'll bet I'm not seven years older'n you."

"I'll call that," Martinez challenged him. "I know for sure you're seven and one half years older. How much you wanta bet?"

They all laughed at that. While they ate, Martinez and Sam figured out the schedule for the night-riders. Only one man would ride guard at a time. The cattle were penned in the canyon, and they were tired—not much chance of them giving any trouble. And the crew was short-handed, and men had to sleep after a hard day's ride.

"You can't ride a bronc," muttered Martinez.

"I cain't, huh? Well, rid one this afternoon. If'n you don't believe me, ask the nighthawk."

The nighthawk nodded. "The oldest hoss in the remuda, Jose. Ol' Flip. He rid him about five steps, too."

Rawhide looked grieviously injured. "Ah, nighthawk, tell'em the truth! Five steps! Hades, I rid that hoss for all of *ten* steps!"

Laughter went around again. But Sam Blanding noticed that Esperanza Alvarez did not laugh.

14

NICK BLAKE and Eno Reed left their broncs in the barn, turning them over to the mozo. They went to the hacienda where Reed fried eggs and made some toast. Shanghai called, "Who cook out there?"

"Stay in bed, you heathen," growled Reed. "Can't a man cook on his own stove?"

"You gettee slove a messed up!"

"Hobble out of that bed," warned Reed, "an' I'll wrap this skillet aroun' your flat head!" He winked at Blake, who was wooden-faced.

"That finished him," said Blake. "He'll not bother you, Eno."

The eggs were good; so was the bacon. Blake ate slowly, his thoughts bitter. His head ached where Miguel Alvarez had slugged him. But the blow to his pride was the worst of the two pains.

Underneath, he was vain, proud. Now, in a few days, two men had buffaloed him—Sam Blanding and now this upstart Mexican, Miguel. He was glad Eno Reed had not seen him lose face out there in the night.

Blake got to his feet. He said, "I'm afraid of that Mexican, Reed. I'm going to kill him." He looked flatly at Eno Reed.

Reed was silent.

Blake repeated, "I'm going to kill him!"

Reed looked up, eyes somber. He nodded slowly. "I guess we better, to protect ourselves. I've been watching him break...Well do it so nobody sees you, and don't have any suspicion come our way."

"I'm no damn' fool!"

Reed smiled a little. "Sometimes I doubt that Blake."

Blake looked hard at him. He did not know whether Eno Reed was joking or serious. That was one of the hard things to read in Reed. He could tell a ribald joke with a dead face, and still be laughing inside.

"I'll let that ride," murmured Blake.

Reed drummed fingers on the white tablecloth. "When?"

Blake said, "I'll get a little sleep, then take my rifle. He might get out into the hills. If he does—Well, a man can be buried back in the buttes, an' nobody'd ever find his carcass."

Reed nodded slowly.

HE DID not ride directly onto the *rancho*. From the high point back of the ranch, he watched the spread through his field glasses. He saw Dona Alvarez working in her garden and he saw Miguel come out and talk to her, then go back into the hacienda. Reed lowered his glasses and waited.

The sun was too warm, so he shifted position. Now the sun slanted over the rocks but did not touch him. Finally he saw Miguel and his sister come out and get into the buckboard driven by a hired hand. They went toward the dock.

Nick Blake watched the buckboard go along the mountain road under him. He thought: I could get close enough to shoot and kill him, using a rifle, but his sister is along, and so is their hired peon, and someone of them might get a glimpse of me. I wonder if she is going to the mainland with him?

He watched through his glasses.

The buggy came to the dock, and the peon stopped the team. Blake saw Miguel Alvarez and the peon get out of the buggy, and Miguel kissed his sister good-bye, and then he and and the hired hand walked to the dock, where they got in the Alvarez boat. Anza turned the team and drove back to the hacienda there against the mountain, while the boat set out to the mainland, the wind in its sails.

Blake waited no longer.

Thirty minutes later, he was down on the sheepranch's dock. He led his bronc down the gangplank and onto the deck, where he tied him to a rail. The horse had made the channel trip before and was used to the sea. Blake got his sails up and into place, he slipped off the ship's moorings, and took to the sea. The wind was just right, and the boat lifted to its push. Blake put it across the waves that were blue and small because of the lack of wind. The tide was low, too.

He could not see the Alvarez boat. By that time, it would be almost halfway across, he figured. He liked the ocean when it was calm, but when it was mad and riled up, he hated it and feared it. For it was impersonal. It had no respect for man's dignity and it fought him and whipped him. It was too big to fight, Blake figured. Too massive.

He wondered where Miguel was going. Just to Buenaventura, to lay around there a few days, or did he intend going north to San Francisco, or south to Los Angeles or San Diego? Or maybe across the Sierra Madres to Bakersfield? But no stages left Buenaventura anyway, even if he were going past the coast port.

Blake thought: Luck is with me. If I can only get him in some alley—in the dark.

That was it! Watch him in Buenaventura, get him as he walked alone, shoot him down! That was the way to do it!

He did not sail directly into Buenaventura. He hit north of the town and anchored his boat among the rocks, and dropped sail. Here the wind did not hit him directly, for it had come up with the fall of the afternoon, and the small vessel rode

with the slow, lazy waves. The saddle-horse pawed once or twice, shoes ripping against the smooth deck.

"Stop that, Smokey!"

The horse pawed again. Blake jerked him around and slashed his forelegs with his quirt. The horse wanted to rear, but his bridle-reins held him down. He stood quietly, watching Blake.

BLAKE HAD a quart bottle of tequila. He didn't like the taste of the liquor, but he did like the feeling it gave him. It got colder as the sun went lower. He wrapped himself in a blanket and waited until dusk was thick.

Then he got his sails up and went out of the cove, tacking against the wind. He reached the open channel and the wind hit his sails, puffing them and sending the craft skimming south. He was farther north of Buenaventura than he had figured, and it took him an hour with a good wind to reach the dock. He came in and the dock-tender threw him a hawser line, and Blake pulled the vessel close to the dock made of logs driven into the sea.

"Your bronc?" asked the man. "You want him?"

Blake considered. "No, not now, anyway. Maybe later." It would all depend on whether Miguel Alvarez had left Buenaventura, or if he was still in the town. The Alvarez boat was not at the dock. Evidently the hired peon had taken it back; Blake had figured that was why the man had gone with Miguel.

Blake walked down the dock, boot heels pounding, and came to the beach. Buenaventura's lights were yellow squares on the dust of the main street.

Blake did not go down the main street. Instead he went into an alley and he came to a small building made of logs. The back door had a padlock but he had the key. The door swung in and Blake entered the building.

A lamp, its copper base filled with whale-oil, hung from a bracket made of manzanita wood, but he did not light its cotton wick. Nor did he light a fire in the bowl of the adobe fireplace that had dried chamiso roots for fuel. He sat on the edge of the bed and watched the main street.

He and Reed had built that small house for just the purpose to which he was putting it—to watch the town from the dark, and to meet there various men who wanted cattle, stolen cattle. Blake waited over an hour. Men and women moved along the street, and the lamplight from windows disclosed their identities to him. Dogs barked and somewhere a burro brayed his doleful tune.

The town grew quieter. And he waited, holding his raw impatience. He wanted to go into the saloons, into the *tiendas,* to see if Miguel were there, but he dared not do that. As it was, the dock-tender knew he was in town. He wished there had been some way to come into Buenaventura without anybody knowing he was in town. Maybe he should have left the boat back in the cove and ridden into town. No, there had been no place to anchor the boat. And if he'd left it alone, somebody might have stolen it. That was a common practice along the coast. See a boat alone, steal it, sell it in one of the big sea markets, either San Francisco or San Diego. No, he had to come into Buenaventura.

TWO MEN came down the street, and Blake's pulse quickened. They turned into the stage depot across the street. Already Blake was out the rear door, hurrying down the alley. The two men crossed the street and came into his vision some ten minutes later, and Blake followed them, his rifle in his hands.

But he did not get a chance to shoot. For young Cesaro Robles was with Miguel, and he wanted to get Miguel alone. But he knew one thing: Miguel was going out on the stage, for he was sure the Californio dandy had gone to buy a ticket. Miguel had carried a suitcase, too; now he was empty-handed. He'd left his suitcase at the depot.

Blake watched them go into young Robles' *casa*. He waited outside, hunkered in the darkness. The wind was chilly, coming as it did across the Pacific, and he buttoned his windbreaker tight around him, taking a nip now and then from his bottle. He was glad, in a sense, when the bottle was finished. He was afraid it would spoil his shooting eye. He threw the bottle away and settled back, the tequila warm in him. He wished he was in a cantina, drinking where it was warm.

But he dared not to go to a saloon.

Minutes limped by, and Blake found himself wondering how a man could be so patient. Once a dog came up to him, and then trotted off. Blake had spoken softly to the cur, his words only a whisper, and therefore the mutt had not barked. Blake shifted his weight to his other leg, his knee numb under him.

He wondered if young Robles would go with Miguel to the stage. Maybe not, for the hour would be late, and Miguel needed no aid with his suitcase, for it was already at the depot.

The rattle of chains, coming down the now deserted street, turned Blake's attention toward the depot. The hostlers were driving out hooked-up teams to transfer to the stages. Four horses were hooked to one Concord, for it was just starting its run to Bakersfield, but the other four horses would be hooked to the San Francisco-bound stage, coming up from Los Angeles.

Tug chains rattled and one man cursed in fast Mexican, holding an unruly off-wheeler by his bridle. Otherwise, there was nobody on the street. Peons were home in bed, and *muchachos* slept. Only the bark of an occasional dog broke the night's monotony.

Passengers were coming out of the depot, lining themselves against the wall to escape the wind. Blake wondered whether young Miguel intended to take the Bakersfield Concord or the one that ran north. What difference did it make?

He knew he would have to act now or never. He'd have to shoot, even if company went to the depot to bid Miguel Alvarez farewell. For once the youth got on the stage—Blake would never get a chance to kill him.

HIS ATTENTION swung to the door of the Robles' *casa*. For Miguel and young Robles had come out, and Blake could hear part of their talk. Blake got to his feet, silent and dark, hidden by black shadows. He stood against the building, his rifle raised a little, and he waited with a hard coldness.

He heard the youths say farewell, and the door closed as Robles entered the house. Miguel, carrying another suitcase, hurried toward the depot, for already the northbound stage was coming into town, tug chains jangling and iron rims echoing from the rocks in the roadbed.

The youth was moving at a tangent from Blake, who had his rifle to his shoulder. In spite of the fact that it was dark, Blake found his sights, although they were not clear. Suddenly, Miguel Alvarez stopped.

First Blake shot for the head. That bullet stopped Miguel. His knees went out, and Blake shot twice for his back, hastening his fall.

The rifle reports were loud. Men were hollering and the stage-horses were roaring. Blake was unhurried. He reached down and got the fired cartridges he had ejected, and he put them in his pocket as he darted back into the alley's darkness.

Three minutes later, settled beside the window in the dark interior of the log building, he saw them carry Miguel into the hotel. And by the way the youth's limp body sagged, he figured the man was dead. He watched them carry the youth into the lobby.

The town doctor hurried up, carrying his satchel. He went into the lobby. The town marshal was questioning all persons who had come running to see what had happened. Blake grinned at that.

The doctor came out, and talked with the marshal. Blake had raised the window an inch or two. He heard their conversation, and smiled.

Miguel Alvarez, the medico said, was dead.

15

THERE HAD been little sleep for Anza that night. She kept thinking about Miguel, and that he was going away; would she ever see him again? She and he shared a secret—a terrible secret. She had almost expressed her loneliness, her fear, that afternoon to Sam Blanding, when they had run wild stock back on the mountain. But she had caught her tongue in time.

Now, lying in her room, the moonlight coming in to lay shadows across her covers, she wished she had told Sam; she would have to tell somebody.

She dozed off, and the rattle of hoofs awakened her. A rider came fast into the courtyard, his bronc coming at a fast run. He let his reins drop and stepped off his sweaty horse.

She recognized him as a man from Buenaventura. What was he doing there at that hour of the night? Why it was almost morning.

The mozo ran out. She heard them talk in fast Spanish, and she caught the word *Miguel.* What had happened? A thousand fears pulled at her....Had Miguel— No, maybe there was a storm coming, and the man had come to warn them! The storm was coming from the direction of San Miguel island. That was it!

The mozo ran into the house, and she heard his sandals go down the hall. He knocked on the room of Don Pablo, and Anza struck her head out her door. "What is it, Pedro?"

"*Su papa*—your father— I must see him!"

Don Pablo was at the door, dressed in a long flannel nightgown. He held a lighted candle. "What is it, Pedro? Why do you come at this hour—?"

"Your *hijo*—Miguel— He is dead —he has been killed! The man, he brought word out from Buenaventura!"

"What do you talk about? Has mescal ruined your brain—?"

The mozo crossed himself. "*Por Dios,* it is true!" He talked quickly, hands aiding his tongue with wide gestures. And Anza listened, her heart a wild, captured bird beating inside of her.

SOON THE entire hacienda was awake. Servants gathered and talked, and most of the women were crying. Dona Alvarez had fainted, and the mozo and Anza had gotten her to her room.

The mozo had tears in his old eyes. "You do not cry, *Senorita* Anza? Is your grief too great for tears?"

"Who killed him?" she asked.

"They do not know, *senorita.* There was the three shots, and he fell while going to the stage. Young Robles—for Miguel had visited that evening at the Robles's *casa*—said Miguel was going to San Francisco. The marshal, he question hombres, but what can he find—" He shrugged in a Latin gesture of depair.

Anza started to cry. She sat on the bed beside her mother, sobbing with her head against a pillow. Her mother stroked her dark hair slowly, almost reverently. "You are all your father and I have now, *hija.* You must be good and strong, for the sake of your father, who needs you more than ever now."

The mozo stood, hat in hand, his face showing his misery. "He was like a son to me, if you will *pardone* me, *hijas.* It was me who first put him into the saddle on his first horse, old Felipe, and his chubby legs were too short for the stirrups, although I shortened them as much as I could. Oh, who would hide to kill him? Did somebody mistake him for somebody else?"

"Who killed him?" echoed Dona Alvarez.

Anza was silent, her sobbing past. She remembered that Miguel had told her about his run-in wth Nick Blake, and how he was afraid Blake would try to kill him. She remembered this incident, and she remembered he had also argued fiercely with Eno Reed, or so he had said. She was sure one of the two had murdered Miguel.

But could she tell her mother that? Fear knifed through her. What if

they knew that Miguel had told her—?

Don Pablo came to the door, and the old mozo excused himself. As he walked past the don, the mozo stopped and grabbed the old man's arm. Don Pablo put his arm around his old retainer and hugged him. Then, wordless, the mozo left, his sandals sounding in the hall.

ANZA WAS alone with her father and mother. Now, if ever, would be the logical time to tell them what she knew. But still she held her tongue. Would it do any good now if she told them? Maybe it would only make matters worse. Don Pablo, once aroused, had a terrible temper, and the knowledge she had might drive him into wild action, foolhardy action. And besides, what concrete proof did she actually have?

They talked until dawn. Don Pablo and her mother would go to the mainland and bring Miguel's body back. They would bury him in the graveyard on the hill above hacienda. They would leave immediately. Dona Alvarez said she did not care to go, but both Anza and her father knew that when she got with old friends—the Robles, the Lopezes, and Marios—in Buenaventura, it would be better for her. Finally she consented to go.

"And you, *hija?*" her father asked. "Do you go with us?"

Anza shook her head. "I wait here, Papa. That is good, isn't it?"

He nodded slowly.

The mozo would take them to Buenaventura. But before he left with her parents, Anza got him to one side and talked with him. He nodded his head vigorously, scowled in wonderment, and looked at her sharply. What plan did the *hija* have in her quick mind, anyway?

"*Si,* Anza, I shall do as you ask."

"And don't tell Mama or Papa, please."

"This is our secret."

But she saw that he was still puzzled by her requests. When the buggy left the hacienda Dona Alvarez was in mourning, a dark veil covering her face, and her father wore his black suit. Anza noticed that suddenly he looked old, terribly old. The mozo climbed into the front seat, took the reins, and got the team to a slow trot, going toward the dock,

Anza watched the rig until the turn of the mountain hid it; then she went to the barn. She saddled her pinto, puttting a side-saddle on him, and rode out the back door. She turned the animal south.

The day was breaking calm, and the sun was growing warmer. The Pacific rolled and pitched, filled with many dreams—a somber mass of water, waiting for the wind and storm to change it into a roaring, surly lion. But she had no eye for the beauty of the ocean, or for the roadrunner that ran ahead of her pinto down the trail, a gangly, gawky bird with a stupendous tail and long, swift-moving legs.

Two hours later, she found Sam Blanding back on the mountain, running wild cattle down into the gully below, where Jose Martinez was working them down to the wagon, miles away. Sam had just put his catch-dogs on two head of steers, driving them through the brush. He saw her coming behind him and he turned his horse; the animal reared as he turned.

"Miss Anza— at this early hour—?"

She pulled her pinto in. Then, speaking quietly, she told him all she knew about Miguel's murder, about how Miguel had ridden with Reed and Blake, how several nights previously they had stolen RB cattle and how Miguel had fought with Nick Blake.

Sam listened his face a frozen mask. He could only guess how much of an effort it was for her to ride to him and tell him her brother, now dead with rifle-balls in his back had ridden with Reed and Blake, stealing his and Rawhide Hinton's RB cattle. He could only suspect what pain it was causing her.

But why had she come to him?

"Did you tell your father and mother this, Anza?"

She shook her head. "No, I couldn't. I wanted to talk with you. I wanted to find out what you advised, what you thought best."

SAM FELT somethng stir in him. So that was why she had come to him first? He wanted to ride close and put his arm around her and kiss her, but perhaps she might think he was taking advantage of her in a moment of sorrow. Her free hand lay on the big horn of her saddle and he put his brown hand over hers,

"Do you want to tell them?"

"I have thought it over from all angles. I do, but yet I don't. I want you to help me."

"That is a difficult task."

She said, "Something inside of me is breaking. I have held this secret for a long, long time. Even at confession. I did not tell the Father. I know I did wrong but—I don't believe I can hold it any longer, Sam."

Sam looked across the rolling, tumbling hills. He did not look at her as he spoke. "I would say you are not doing the right thing to yourself, Anza. You are hiding a secret that only causes you pain. For your own good, you should tell your father. And you should tell him for the good of your father, and your mother. I do not think it right you hide this from them."

She watched him.

"Put yourself in your father's place, Anza. He raised Miguel, loved him, cared for him. Now Miguel is dead. He is a just man, and he has to act against his son's killer."

"I am afraid of that, Sam. I am afraid he will go against Reed and Blake, and they will shoot him down. He has a terrible temper."

"Make him promise, before you tell him, that before doing anything, he will come and talk to me. Make him promise that."

"He does not know you like I do."

"He knows me well enough to know my word is good. And he knows Rawhide well; they are old friends. Tell him he has to talk with both of us.'

"I shall do that. Otherwise, I tell him nothing at all."

Sam nodded. "I'll tell Rawhide he is coming, and we can be prepared. Now what is next after that?"

"We want you and your crew at Miguel's funeral. We will bury him in the family plot by the hacienda."

"We'll be there." He added, "But maybe, if we set a trap for Reed—"

"Miguel told me a number of things. The next raid that Reed and Blake make will come on the east side of the island. While you are over here gathering your cattle, they will raid your cattle across the mountain."

"Where are they going to load?"

SHE TOLD him the spot, and that Shane Malone would be there with his ship. Sam nodded, remembering that Rawhide Hinton had cursed Malone a number of times, marking him as a high-binding pirate. He was deep with thoughts, and he voiced one of them. "Maybe they won't hit at that particular spot, but they'll hit over here, I think. I've been guessin' at that point myself. With the outfit deserted, with only a man at the home ranch, and with cattle plentiful over there—"

She said, smiling wistfully, "I feel better, *Senor* Sam. I am glad I came to you, to tell you."

She looked small and girlish.

"You'll come back later?"

"I'll come with Papa."

Sam reminded her that perhaps, when she came with her father, she would know more facts that would be concrete evidence that either Reed or Blake had killed Miguel. Maybe she would have some evidence that they could act on, direct evidence.

She left him sitting his bronc in the clearing. She loped the pinto across a mesa, and rode into the barn before her parents got home. Dona Alvarez did not return with Don Pablo, for she would stay on the mainland until funeral arrangements were completed, and she wanted Esperanza with her.

"The coffin will come tomorrow, *hija.*" Her father held her and stroked her black hair. "The *Senor* Garcia will take his body home."

Senor Garcia was the undertaker.

"I go back tomorrow," said the don.

"I came home to arrange things here."

"Did they find out who—who killed him?"

Don Pablo shook his head and walked into the hacienda. The old mozo was unhooking the team, and she waited until he had them in a stall in the barn.

"I made inquiries, *Senorita* Anza. At the dock, my old friend, the dock-master, told me that last night, early in the evening, one of the men came with his boat, his saddle-horse on board."

"Who was he?"

"Nick Blake, he was. When the dock-master came this morning, Blake's boat was gone."

"Did anybody see Blake in Buenaventura?"

"*Si*, I made questions. The drunkard Pedro Gonzales, he came home in the alley, and he saw *Senor* Blake. And Blake, so Pedro claims, carried a rifle. Pedro says Blake did not see him. He swore me to eternal silence, for he is afraid of Blake. I loosened his tongue with two quarts of tequila. He has a dry tongue, that hombre."

"We will keep this our secret," said Anza. She turned toward the house and went to her father's room. Don Pablo lay on the bed, tired from his trip. She sat down. She said, "Papa, I have something to tell you, and you must listen."

"What is it, daughter?"

"First, you must promise me something. What I am to tell you will break your heart, even worse than your sorrow does, and you must promise not to act against my wishes. You must promise to see *Senores* Hinton and Blanding, and get their advice."

His eyes were dark pinpoints. "Daughter, what is it?"

"You promise?"

"Tell me first."

She shook her head.

"I promise" he said.

16

AFTER ANZA Alvarez had left, Sam Blanding rode down to where Rawhide Hinton was working at the roundup wagon.

"Get cold feet," growled the old cowpuncher, "an' let them slants scare you into comin' into the wagon. Are you gettin' to be a sofa-pillow cowboy, Sam?"

"Them cut-coulees scared me plumb stiff." Sam grinned. He got down and went to the wagon, where he poured himself a cup of coffee. He cradled the warm cup in his cold hands and looked up at the mountain.

Rawhide was puttering around, cutting up carrots to put in a stew. He'd brought the carrots from his garden. "All right, younker, speak your piece. What be on your mind, Sam?"

Sam told him what Esperana Alvarez had told him. The old man stood silent, big ladle motionless in his mulligan, his eyes quiet and serious. "My Lord," he said, "what's next?"

"Keep that under your shirt, Rawhide. Anza and I agreed that only five people—outside of Reed and Blake—would ever know that Miguel rode with the sheepmen on rustlin' raids."

"Shane Malone knows. And when he gets drunk, he talks. An' somebody at the Reed ranch— some of the cowpunchers—must know.'

"We talked that over, too. We'll get Malone out of circulation. The Coast Guard will get him, if one of us don't. I'm goin' into Buenaventura and talk with the fellow on the Coast Guard there about Malone."

"Good idea, Sam."

"First I'll talk with Don Pablo. From what the girl understands, Reed and Blake aim to steal some cattle off the east side of the island. Steal them right outa our front yard, a man might say, while we're over here on roundup."

Rawhide commenced stirring his stew. "We'll see them cows are around," he promised. "We'll sure see that. Well, I'll rod the wagon, Sam, while you go to Buenaventura. You might have to head into Los Angeles on the stage, 'cause sometimes that Coast Guard gent ain't in Buenaventura."

"Look for me when you see me, Rawhide."

They made other plans. One man

would always be watching the Reed's sheep ranch, and that way they would know where Reed and Blake were all the time. Two others would go across the range in a day or two and haze cattle there, making them handy for Reed and Blake to get. When the pair left their *rancho* and rode on RB grass, the two punchers would hide up high and let the two ride on RB range unmolested.

"Keep up the pretense of our round-up," Sam advised. "Don't drop a clue that will make them think we're wise to them. Savvy?"

"I'm dry behin' my ears," growled Rawhide. "Man, it breaks me heart, Sam. I thought a lot of Miguel, the o'nery, high-headed kid. So he helped steal our cattle, huh? That gal had grit, comin' to you thataway. Must have hurt her pride, the pretty little creature. You goin' to marry her, Sam?"

Sam smiled. "I'm sure goin' to try."

"She cottons to you, Sam. A man kin see it in her pretty eyes. Ride a light kak, cowpunch."

SAM PUT his spurs to his bronc and loped toward the Alvarez hacienda. The wind came in and whipped against him, but it was a warm wind this time. He was grateful for the good weather, and he hoped it would last a few days. But Rawhide claimed a storm was in sight.

He wondered if Don Pablo would be in his *casa*. Otherwise, he would get Anza to go with him to Buenaventura, and they would talk to the don there. He was sure the end of the riddle was in sight. Rapidly the problem was being solved. The girl's information, and the death of Miguel. had pushed the matter to a fast climax. He felt sure of that.

Two miles from the Alvarez hacienda, a man rode out of the brush and blocked his trail. Sam recognized him as a Reed cowpuncher, and he put his free hand on his gun. The man lifted his right hand high.

"You ridin' to the Alvarez hacienda, Blandin'. If you are, I'll ride with you."

Sam nodded. The man's bronc fell into step beside Sam's RB horse. "You ride for Reed, don't you?"

The man nodded. He was short, wiry man of middle age, and he wore a gun in a dark, low-tied holster. "Yeah, I draw Reed wages."

"You're a cowpuncher," murmured Sam, "an' you work for a sheep outfit?

The rider shrugged. "Reed pays me more wages than I'd get punchin' wild cattle. I tend sheep wagons for him."

Sam understood. The man claimed he drove out a wagon or buggy, loaded with grub and supplies, and he distributed these to the various sheep wagons. Sam figured he was hired by Reed for another purpose, but he did not mention it.

"Reed sent me over to find out if it was true that Miguel got killed last night in Buenaventura. You know anything about it, Blandin'?"

Sam said, "It's true," He looked at the man's face. Not a ripple of change, of emotion, went across it.

"Damn, that's tough, fella. Wonder who did it?"

"Nobody knows, I reckon."

"Seen the old don come from the dock with a team a while ago," said the Reed man. "About thirty minutes ago, I reckon. His missus wasn't with him. Reckon he must've come back from Buenaventura." He stopped and scowled. "No use me ridin' into the hacienda, seein' you tol' me what I wanted to know."

Sam asked, "Why didn't Reed come himself?"

"Eno figured it was only a wild rumor I guess. Wanted me to check an' make sure, seein' my work was goin' to bring me over in this country anyhow. Well, so long, Blandin'." He loped back toward the Reed *rancho*.

SAM HAD a wry smile as he rode into the hacienda yard. Ducks quacked on the pond and hens clucked, rolling in the dust. But to the unknowing eye, the *rancho* would appear deserted of humans. The hacienda, servants, retainers, and owners, were in mourning.

He knew that the Reed man had

been lying. He had been a spy, posted by Reed to watch the Alvarez *rancho*. and he'd seen Sam coming. He'd ridden down off the rocks just to talk to Sam and find out what he knew. Now he was going back to report to his boss.

Surely Reed and Blake would both come over to the hacienda. Their trump card demanded that they come on a social visit to express their regrets about Miguel's death. For suspicion would point to them if they did not act as neighbors should in times of sorrow.

Both knew Don Pablo's terrible temper. Surely if the old man knew that Miguel had ridden with them on raids, he would blow up and threaten them for leading his son into thievery. Thus a visit to the Alvarez *rancho* would tell them much they wanted to know.

Sam rode into the barn. Anza was tightening the latigo on her pinto, and she was surprised to see him. "Father and I were coming to see you and *Senor* Rawhide."

Sam dismounted. They were alone, he saw. "You told him, then?"

"*Si.*" She told him about Don Pablo's reaction to her words. At first he would hardly believe her, but finally he had.

San nodded busy in thought. He then informed her about meeting the Reed man and that Reed and Blake would undoubtedly come to express their regrets. "Your dad had better play his part well," he finished.

"He promised he would, Sam. I know it'll be hard for him—I hope he doesn't lose his head, and grow angry and reveal all our plans!"

She told Sam about the mozo finding out that Nick Blake had sailed to Buenaventura the night before, and that a man had seen him in the dark, carrying a rifle. Sam knew then that Blake had killed Miguel Alvarez. And there was a hard, round ball in his throat.

Not that he had any great sense of loss at Miguel's murder. He'd scarcely known the wild youth. But he kept thinking of Don Pablo, who knew now of his son's treachery, and of Dona Alvarez, who would soon know, also. It was hard on them. It was a blow from which they would never fully recover.

Sam and the girl went to the hacienda. Don Pablo was instructing some retainers in Spanish, and Sam waited with his hat in hand. Although he did not understand all the don said, he judged the man was commissioning the retainers to dig the grave. The man left and the don spoke to Sam in flawless English. "We are all lucky—my good wife and my daughter and myself—to have you at this time, *Senor* Blanding. You will have to forgive us if our sorrow gets the better of us now and then."

Sam felt a sense of loss, and he had no words to fit the situation. Anza saw his lack of words and said, "Sit down, please, Sam."

SAM FOUND the seat of the chair. He leaned forward then, talking in short, swift sentences. And Don Pablo nodded now and then, agreeing with his plan. Sam saw a fierce, hard light creep into the old man's eyes. "I shall ride with you, when the time comes? I am not too old to shoot a pistol straight, *senor*."

Sam looked at Anza, concern in his eyes. Slowly the girl nodded. "That is your right by blood, *Senor*," he said quietly. "When the time comes, you will be there. Now when Reed and Blake come, you will keep your poise, *senor*. You will do that, or we all will fail."

"*Si*, I pledge that."

Don Pablo grasped Sam's right hand. His fingers were strong and Sam felt their power. "*Hija*, wine for the *senor* and myself. Where are your manners, daughter?"

Anza poured wine into three crystal goblets. The sunlight reflected from the red, dancing liquid. "One for me, too, Papa," she said.

"This time only, *hija*."

She smiled at Sam. "To him, I am a little girl."

They drank a slow solemn drink. Then Sam turned to go, and told the don he was going to Buenaventura the next day, early in the morning. Sam said he should be back sometime

the following night, and Don Pablo wished him luck on his mission.

Anza went with him to the stable. They walked through the garden, where the rose bushes hid them from the house. She said, "Sam, look at this pretty rose," and they stopped.

"Don't pick it," he said. "It has thorns."

She was close to him. She said "Why do, pretty things have thorns, I wonder?" The question was irrelevant and meaningless. She knew it and Sam knew it. "Do I have thorns, Sam? Or am I not pretty?"

Sam put his arm around her waist. She came to him and he kissed her lips. They were one for a while, and then she stepped back. "Sam, what if anybody—what if a peon—saw us?"

"I never felt any thorns," Sam said quietly.

She said, *"Buenas tardes,"* and ran into the house.

Sam went to the barn and got his horse. A man travels a long way, he thought, and finally he finds what he wants. Odd, the things that happen to a man ....The Black Hills were far away, covered with snow and cold, and here there was summer, eternal summer? But why did he think of that?

He rode into the RB ranch, where he got the mozo, and they went to the dock. Don Pablo had said they could use his boat. Sam knew nothing about a sailboat but the mozo could handle the sheets. Sam got deathly sick as the small craft pitched and rose. But when they docked at Buenaventura, he felt somewhat better. The mozo wore a small smile.

"The seas she is tougher than a bad bronc no, Sam?"

Sam climbed up on the deck "I'll get my ground-legs back pronto, I hope."

Anza had told him to inform her mother that she would come over with Don Pablo in the morning. Sam instructed the mozo to get this message to Dona Alvarez. The dona was at the Robles's *casa* her husband had said.

Sam went to the courthouse. Yes, the Coast Guard was out. He had taken the boat, a clerk said, and he and another man had gone out into the Channel. Why? He didn't know. When would he be back? *Quien sabe?* Sometimes they went out for weeks, before returning.

Another clerk came in, and from him Sam found out that the two Coast Guard men hadn't taken many supplies. "They should be back tonight, I think."

Sam went to a cantina to idle away the time. From here he could see the courthouse. Darkness came and he felt the raw push of impatience He had much to do and yet he had to stay there—and wait—

The mozo was with him. The man had seen Dona Alvarez, and delivered his message. *Si,* he knew where the two Coast Guard men lived. He would go down there and see if they were home yet.

Ten minutes later, he was back. "No, they are not in yet, *Senor* Sam. But when they come, one of the *muchachos* come to tell us. The wives do not know when their men come home."

Sam ordered two beers. They sat back in their chairs and watched the few people drift in and out of the cantina. On this week-day night few peons went to town. Sam debated about going back to Santa Juanita without seeing the Coast Guard men. He wondered if it were not best that he and the mozo go down on the dock and wait until midnight. If the men were not in port by then they could go back to Santa Juanita.

The mozo reminded him that the port office would be closed by now, and it would be cold out on the dock. The cantina, at least, stayed open until after midnight, and it was warm inside.

MIDNIGHT came. A *muchacho* around ten years old came into the catina. The proprietor spoke harshly to him. "You are too young to come in here, Matthew. Why aren't you in your bed?"

"My father, he send me. The *Americanos*—he wants them to come to our casa." The boy waved at Sam and the mozo. "Follow me, please?"

Sam had to smile at the boy's assumed importance. He and the mozo followed the lad, with the old man mumbling about "the young generation, they think they are so smart." The two Coast Guard men, eating their late supper, looked up at them, "You look for us, *senores?*"

Sam introduced himself. They had heard of him being on Santa Juanita, they said. Talking quickly, Sam told him all he knew—how Reed and Blake had rustled RB cattle, how Shane Malone's boat had taken them to market.

"Who told you all this?"

Sam had decided not to drag Miguel Alvarez's name into the mess, so he refused to tell where he had gotten his knowledge. He named the night when Reed was supposed to hit, and the point where the cattle were to be loaded in Shane Malone's boat.

They had a talk that lasted for almost two hours. What if Reed did not hit on that particular night, or what if Shane Malone did not drop anchor at the spot among the rocks? They got the set-up all settled.

They would pack grub, take six men with them, and hide their craft among the rocks. From there they could watch the sea. Evidently Malone would come from the north, from the direction of San Francisco; therefore they would hide in the rough breakers at the north end of Santa Juanita.

There would be eight of them, all armed, and surely Malone didn't have that big a crew. They would wait until part of the cattle got on board, and then they would make their play.

But the men on land—Sam and Don Pablo and old Rawhide Hinton—would have full jurisdiction there. The Coast Guard would take care of the lawlessness on water, but the fight on land would belong to them. Sam got to his feet, agreeing with that point, and he and the mozo left.

Dawn colored the sky when he and the mozo sent the Alvarez boat against the dock at Santa Juanita. Already Anza and her father and a retainer waited for the boat to return to Bueventura. Sam and the don talked briefly, with Sam telling him about the two Coast Guard men.

"That is good," said the don.

Sam helped Anza into the boat. Her hand was small and soft in his, and she gave it a tight, sharp squeeze. Her eyes were bright and warm, although there was sorrow in them.

Sam and the mozo rode toward the RB hacienda. Once Sam looked down on the Pacific, noticing that the Alvarez boat was already far out in the Channel.

17

NICK BLAKE rode into the yard, his bronc lathered, and the man stepped down, turning his horse over to the mozo. He clomped into the house, spurs clanging, gear creaking.

Eno Reed sat at the big oak table, a tequila bottle and two glasses on the lace tablecloth.

"You drink out of two glasses, huh?" growled Blake.

Reed smiled slowly, his sunken eyes glowing. He knew what was bothering Blake; he had been out on the mountains, out in the cold wind, watching the range. And he, Reed, had sat home before the fire, warm and drinking.

"You can use one, Blake."

Blake said, "Sure generous of you." He poured tequila and drank. "I was out on lookout, Reed. Something is going on, I tell you. Sam Blanding took the Alvarez skiff and went to Buenaventura, and when he docked it a few minutes ago, the girl and Don Pablo took it back for the mainland."

"They're going after Miguel's body, Blake. Hell, the don told us yesterday, when we was over to see him, that him an' the girl was goin' to the mainland this mornin', an' would bring back the body."

Nick Blake rubbed his beard and scowled. "Yeah, but it looks funny to me—"

Reed interrupted sharply. "What looks odd to you?"

"This Sam Blanding going to Buenaventura in the night. What in the

hell did he do there, Reed? That's what I want to know."

Reed was silent.

"How do we know that this Miguel gent didn't talk to somebody, tell them all he knew about us? How do we know he didn't know for sure we aim to hit RB cattle on the east side of Santa Juanita while Blanding and Rawhide Hinton hold a roundup on the west?"

"We don't know." Reed paused. "That is, we don't know for sure. We got to run a lot on premise, Nick."

"We were talking over that raid, saying when it would be pulled, and where. We were in the house here, not thinking Miguel Alvarez was within miles, when suddenly, right in the middle of our planning, in he walks. How much did he hear, Reed? I ask you that: How much do you figure he heard?"

"Don't ask me, Nick. I wasn't usin' Miguel's ears; he was." Reed walked the room, boots hard on the floor. Suddenly he pounded one fist against a palm. "But I don't think he heard anything, fella. I don't think so."

Blake shook his thick head. "We gotta be sure, Eno. Otherwise, if Miguel has talked, we might ride into a trap. But do you figure he talked to anybody?"

REED STOOD wide-legged. He looked down at the floor, eyes slightly muddy. Then a smile came slowly and gave his eyes clearness. "Hell, that kid never told nobody, Blake. We can lay our last peso on that. What if he told his mother or sister? They'd be sure to tell the old don, wouldn't they? They couldn't keep a secret like that inside of them. Women can't do things like that, that's all."

"And he wouldn't tell his old man, Eno. The old man would kill him, and I mean just that. He's as proud as hell of his blood and his reputation. And when we talked with Don Pablo yesterday afternoon, he was civil enough. And he sure wouldn't have welcomed us had he known his dead kid an' us stole RB cattle together."

"That's right, Blake."

"But what about his money in the 'Frisco bank? The bank will notify Don Pablo, an' he'll reckon something is wrong. For how would Miguel get that much dinero? He never had no apparent income."

"The clerk will transfer that to our account. We were named his beneficiaries, remember?"

"Oh, yes...that's right. Looks to me, Reed, that this whole thing is sewed up good. When my rifle knocked Miguel down, it also knocked a hunk of dinero into our pockets, huh?"

Reed put his heavy legs out in front of him as he sat down, and he looked at his polished boots. He spoke in a wary tone. They would hit RB cattle on the night they'd selected, but they would not hit at the spot selected. They would move stock to the southernmost tip of Santa Juanita. There, from the rocks, they would load the RB stock. And Shane Malone, his boat loaded with beef, could swing out into the Pacific, or double back and freight the stock straight into Los Angeles.

"But how will we get word to Malone about the change?" Blake wanted to know.

Reed had that figured out, too. They would send a man to Santa Barbara, across the rough part of the Channel. The man could then go to Paso Robles and wire Shane Malone on the Southern Pacific telegraph.

"Malone will be just about ready to leave 'Frisco when the wire reaches him. If he doesn't get it, we can swing him out in the Channel by sending a boat out to intercept him. Anyway, we'll get him to the point, not where we planned. You go out and get Gyuado, will you?"

Blake left.

Reed got paper and wrote:

Meet us at Point, south, not at appointed place. Same date.

He put it in an envelope and gave it to Gyuado, a dark-skinnd Mexican, rattling instructions in quick Mexican.

Reed gave him his instruction, with Blake nodding confirmation. The man left immediately. He would get fresh

broncs at haciendas north of Santa Barbara and cover the hundred or so odd miles to Paso Robles by midnight. He could take his time coming back. Reed gave him thirty pesos before he left, and Gyuado showed a big smile as he jingled the coins.

"He'll get it through," said Blake. He checked their plan and found no errors. Everything was shipshape. He got another drink. Sitting there, warm now, a good drink at his elbow, others warm inside of him, he grew conversational. But Reed did not warm to his conversation.

REED WAS silent for the most part. Now and then he reached for the bottle, poured, and drank.

"What's on your mind?" Blake asked finally.

Reed's sunken eyes showed a faint amusement. "Nothing much, friend. I'm just sitting here, and not thinking much. Just letting my thoughts run around. Funny, how a man will love money. Look at us two. We have a good spread here, make good money from sheep, yet we rustle RB cattle. Why?"

"Money brings power. We want the island, all to ourselves.

"That's it. There's somethin' else, too. Neither of us can sit still, we have to keep drivin'. I've noticed that about you, and it's driven me from the day I can remember. What will happen when we do get this island?"

Blake's smile was bleak. "I've thought of that. Nobody to fight, the place all ours, nobody to come in, 'cause we control all the graze. Will we fight against one another, Reed?"

Reed smiled at that. "I hardly think so. We've been wrapped by the same dark blanket of hate, of intrigue, so long that we are inseparable, a man might say." He had a little volume on the table and he tapped his forefinger against it. "Did you ever read Shakespeare?"

"Only in grammar school, and then because the master made us. Hell, he learned us to hate the book, and the name still brings nothing but chills to me."

Reed read:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

There was a silence. Blake poured himself another drink, glanced to see if Reed's glass was empty, saw the man had an untasted drink, and recorked the bottle. He was not given to philosophy. He had been born, he lived, and he would die. There was nothing he could do about it, he figured.

Reed was following his volume now, apparently unmindful of Nick Blake. A man rode into the yard and they heard his horse stop, and soon spurs announced his arrival.

He was a swarthy, thick-legged man, marked by the saddle. "They're still gatherin' wild stuff, Reed," he said. "The mozo stayed at the ranch, and Sam Blanding rode over to the west, to the roundup camp. That leaves only the mozo at the *rancho*. The rest of RB men are on Cow-gather."

"Anything else?" Reed asked.

"That's all, I reckon. Oh, yes, me an' another boy was over along the seacoast today, on RB range, and the cattle are nice there, Reed. Fact is, we saw about two hundred head almost in one bunch, down along the cane brakes. And nobody in miles around them, seein' RB hands are on roundup."

Reed nodded.

The cowpuncher left, after stating that another rider was watching the RB roundup crew. "Hid back in the high rocks, boss, with a pair of glasses." They heard his boots trail down the hallway and die in the distance.

REED WENT back to his book. Nick Blake nursed his drink, then went to his room, where he rolled between sougans, boots and all. Reed ate dinner, letting Blake sleep, then he went to the barn, where he saddled a roan stud and rode south for the mountains.

He carried some cartridges in his saddle-bag, and he distributed them to his herders. The cougars were cutting into his herds and he wanted to kill every cat he could. He had little, if any, friendship for the herders. How any man could spend his entire twenty-four hours a day, year after year, around bleating, stinking woolies was more than he could understand.

His herders were Basque and Mexican, men raised with sheep. They lived solitary lives with their dogs and their herds. During lambing season they worked night and day for weeks. During shearing season in a spring they also did a lot of work, shearing the struggling, kicking sheep and tying the fleeces and throwing them into the immense sack, hung from scaffolding, where a boy inside trompted the fleeces down, pounding them into the sack.

Reed had a few words with each man. He knew that if things got tight and bullets started to sing, he could expect no help from his herders. A bunch of cowpunchers, he realized, would fight for their iron, but not a sheepherder. Something about handling sheep, being with them all the time, must have taken something out of his herders. But maybe the men had been peaceful men before they started herding sheep. That was it. A man with any fight in him would never consent to even start herding sheep. His self-respect would not permit it.

The afternoon was almost gone by the time he had seen his herders and delivered the ammunition. He was sitting the stud in the sandstone rocks high above the trail, when the Alvarez family brought Miguel's body from Buenaventura. The undertaker had come over with the body, and a boatload of friends had also come. Retainers had rigs at the dock to meet the party and the buggies were below on the canyon road. Reed could see the casket of Miguel in the front buggy.

Sitting his bronc, the man took off his hat, his sunken eyes somber behind heavy brows. He held his hat over his heart until the procession had passed. He watched the party until a bend in the trail took it from his view.

He and Nick Blake were not going to the funeral service that would be held in the morning at the Alvarez hacienda. They had told Don Pablo they were not attending, and Reed had asked his pardon, for he had explained that he thought it fitting that only the family, and its very close friends, be present at the ceremony. And Don Pablo had nodded and thanked him and Blake for riding over.

They had been a little apprehensive about going to the Alverez hacienda. If Miguel had told his parents, of his sister, about their raids—They had both packed guns and they had been a bit uneasy upon riding into the yard. But the sincerity of the don, the gratefulness of Anza and Dona Alvarez for their thoughtfulness, had been genuine—he knew, then, that Miguel had died with his secret unshared.

He touched his spurs to his mount. He put the stud south again, riding along the ridge of the mountains that made up Santa Juanita's backbone. From there, at times he could see the rough waves coming across miles of unbroken water; to the east, he could see the calm surface that lay between the island and the mainland.

NORTH, HE saw the outlines of the other three islands, San Miguel, San Clemente, and Santa Barbara. And the faint, blue outlines of Santa Catalina seemed like a shifting mirage to the south.

But Eno Reed had no eyes for this beauty. Back in his hacienda, when he had read of Macbeth to Nick Blake, he had been in a generous, somber mood. But the wind was chilly there, due to the fact that it came of water and to the altitude and that mood had died, had been supplanted by an aggressive one.

This thing would eventually work out to its natural solution, he saw. Gradually, boatload by boatload, he would whittle down the RB herds. Maybe there would be a bit of gunplay, and maybe there would not be.

The island was big and the nights dark, and there were a thousand places where a man could load cattle onto a boat. And if gunplay did come—Reed smiled a little.

He was so far south that, below him to the west, he saw RB riders hazing out wild cattle. He could see the herd down in the gully and he noticed how small it was. And that changed his smile to a frown.

He had always hoped that the RB would string a drift fence, instead of this roundup. For now, from the small herd of cows and steers gathered, Rawhide Hinton would have some definite method of determining how many head he had actually lost. Up to then, the old man had based most of his statements on guesswork; now he had substantial proof cattle were leaving Santa Juanita.

Reed squatted in the rocks, his bronc hidden back in the boulders. He had fieldglasses to follow the RB riders. He knew how many men were on the RB crew and he counted the riders now, And he found he was short two cowpunchers.

Where were they?

Carefully, he searched the brush; he could not find them. Probably back in the deep brush, beyond the cliffs, he thought, and I can't see them. Well, what about it, anyway?

Behind him, he heard a shod hoof hit stone. He turned and backed against a rock, standing there silent in a shadow, his rifle raised a little. The horse stopped walking, and now he heard boots on the stone.

"Eno," a voice said. "Eno Reed."

Reed waited, making sure. The voice called again. The tension left him and he squatted again.

"This way, fellow."

His cowpuncher came around the ledge, carrying his rifle. "I seen you come in," he said.

"You must've been as high as the moon."

"One place higher than where we are. That's up yonder on them rocks." The man pointed to the south.

"What do you know?"

The man spoke softly. The stage was set, he said. RB cattle were bunched on the southern tip of the island, and RB riders were below them, there in the middle of the grass. If Shane Malone made it on time—

"He's never missed a load yet," reminded Reed.

"Then them cattle is as good as loaded, boss."

Reed looked at the RB men. "Two men missing."

The puncher said the two had ridden to the home ranch, evidently for supplies. Reed nodded and let his vigilance drop. They sat there an hour in silence, and dusk started to build up. Reed got to his boots.

"There'll be a guard out later, fellow."

Reed rode back north.

18

SAM BLANDING curled his bullwhip, tied it around his saddle-fork, and rode to the roundup wagon, down there in the arroyo. His catch-dogs, winded and tired, trotted behind his bronc, tongues out.

Other riders were coming in. Two dogs started fighting, tired as they were, and a rider rode in between them, his bullwhip talking. The dogs felt the sting of the lash and broke apart, yowling.

"Just like us humans," growled old Rawhide, stirring some mulligan in his big kettle. "Fightin' all the time, whether we're tired, drunk, sick, or sober. Well, what did you see, Sam?"

"Lots of brush, Rawhide."

Rawhide squinted at him. "Now don't use any lip with me, my good man. You know full well what I mean. See any of the Reed critters?"

"I been punchin' cows, not lookin' for Reed." Sam was unsaddling his tired horse. He ran an appreciative eye over the set-up. The cattle were grazing on the level bank. Behind them was a steep wall, the end of the dead arroyo. And the nighthawk had constructed a brush barrier in the bottleneck below so the cattle could not get out of the canyon.

The nighthawk had night-broncs for them. There was no night riding

to do, but one of them just about had to be on guard all the time. Sam's tired horse rolled on the grass, then trotted to the creek where he drank and fell to grazing.

The nighthawk had shot some jackrabbits, and he was feeding these to the dogs, who were fighting and growling over the red meat. Two men were sitting cross-legged beside the wagon, with plates on their laps, eating their evening chuck. Sam got a plate and old Rawhide dished out some mulligan.

"More," said Sam.

"There's enough there for two men now."

Sam felt ringy. He'd missed a night's sleep, had pounded leather all day, and his seasickness was just leaving him. "Don't argue, ol' man, or I'll grab you by the neck an' stick your homely head into that hot mulligan!"

"You can't do it!" Rawhide challenged him.

Sam had to smile. The old saddleman looked like a banty rooster, beak stuck out, and ready to scrap. But Rawhide put more stew on his plate. "You got a lot of cows," stated Sam. "You can afford to dish out some mulligan."

"We did have," growled Rawhide.

Sam carried his plate and coffee and biscuits to the wagon wheel, and sat down with his back against a spoke.

"Rawhide's right," a puncher said slowly. "We did have a lot of cattle here...once. Now I guess they're in 'Frisco."

"Or Los Angeles," the other said.

Sam looked at their gather. Let's see, they'd been out three days—or was it four?—and they only had these few head of cattle, and they'd even worked some of the range twice, re-riding it to make sure all its stock had been gathered. Well, he didn't know how many cows had been on that grass, for he'd been in the Black Hills then, but he did know how many were on it now.

And that wasn't many.

A PUNCHER rode in, stripped his cayuse and clomped over to the mess wagon, where he got his plate a chuck. He bit into one of Rawhide's biscuits. "Tough as an RB cow," he grunted.

"You're like an ol' hoss," grumbled Rawhide. "You ain't got no teeth. A man can't chew nothin' hard when he has only his gooms to bite with. What's new over to the home ranch, fella?"

The cowpuncher said the mozo was there alone. He'd got the squaw out of the way, talking her into visiting relatives in Campo, smack on the Mex border in California. "She'll be out of the way, seein' any bullets start singin' aroun' the home ranch. But I don't figure there'll be too much fight, huh, Sam?" The waif had gone to Buenaventura.

"They won't give up," prophesied Sam.

The puncher scowled. "Mebbe this li'l boy should never have left Texas, huh? Hey, ol' man, how about some more of that cooked cow?"

"Your belly's bigger'n your mouth," mumbled Rawhide. "No wonder the RB is broke. They must've starved you in Texas, an' now out here in the Pacific, you're puttin' on a litter taller. Don't get so heavy you cain' climb up into a kak."

"More mulligan an' less talk, ol' man."

Sam and the cowpuncher talked, with old Rawhide listening, ladle in one hand. According to the man, cattle were pretty well bunched on the west side of the island, around the spot where Miguel Alvarez had said Shane Malone would anchor his boat. He'd seen both Eno Reed and another rider, one of the Reed men, back in the mountains, and they'd been watching the RB hands gather wild stock.

"Scouting," said Sam quietly.

They talked further. No use, Sam said, in hazing cattle on the west side any more; they didn't want things too handy for Reed, as he might get suspicious. They'd all work on the roundup crew tomorrow, for Reed was supposed to hit tomorrow night. With them hazing wild stock, Reed would have no grounds to suspect a trap.

THE MEN were tired. Long, gruelling hours in the saddle had taken the sap from them. Only one man would be on guard a shift, not two riders as was customary on roundup. For the cattle were penned in the box canyon.

All that a guard would have to do was ride circle and see that no cougars or bears scared the cattle and stampeded them. For there were a few bears on Santa Juanita, Rawhide, had told Sam. They stayed back in the canyons and were rather wary, but now and then one killed a spring calf.

The cattle were edgy. They'd been run hard and worked from the brush, and they were leery. The smell of a bear or a cougar might get them running, and they'd go over the barrier of brush, then.

Sam did not expect Reed to hit his herd. Common sense told him the sheepman would not openly come out and fight the RB. Reed was playing a cautious, close game. He was slowly but surely chiseling the RB herds down, cutting them down. Although suspicion pointed toward him, no direct evidence named him a cowthief. He would only lose, not gain, by hitting the herd.

The nighthawk took the first guard. They took shifts that ran an hour and a half. The nighthawk turned in after waking Jose Martinez and putting him on guard. When Martinez's shift was ended, he awoke Sam, who was snoring in his sougans, spread out under a live-oak.

"That time, Sam."

The dark Mexican had hunkered as Sam had pulled on his boots and adjusted his spurs. A cornhusk cigaro hung from the corner of Martinez's mouth, the coal glowing in the moonlight night.

"Tomorrow night, we see who is boss of the island, no? Tomorrow this time, with luck, she should be over, no?"

Sam nodded.

Martinez was thoughtful for ten seconds. Then, "I hope we all come through, Sam. I hope that we do, all of us."

Sam said fervently, "Lord, I hope so, too."

Martinez put his dark hand over Sam's. "We pull through," he said simply. "Each hour, I pray in my saddle. *Dios* will be with us, for we are right. We are in the right, and the right always wins."

Sam got his night-horse and rode to the east of the canyon. The moonlight was brilliant, making the cattle stand out clearly. An owl zoomed overhead, evidently hunting cottontails, for Sam saw a cottontail run into some brush. The owl wheeled across space, and disappeared.

Yes, the right always won. But before it won, sometimes men got killed. He hated to think of that. He had been on that grass only a few days, yet each man on his crew had become a friend, and maybe tomorrow night— A man shouldn't think of such things, for death is always with him, but still he couldn't help it.

THE CATTLE were quiet. Some grazed while others lay down, tired after their run. There weren't many of them. Maybe six—seven hundred head. That grass could stand lots more cattle grazing on it. They'd work north with these, and in three days the gather should be over. They'd haze these cattle across the mountains, work brands on the unbranded stuff in the home corrals, doctor some of the sick cows, then turn them loose in the grain stubble, and let them take it easy. Then they'd put some of the stock that had run on the west side of the mountains on that range. That stock was tamer and would be easier to handle next spring, when they worked that country again with rope and saddle.

Sam kept thinking of Miguel Alvarez. Now he lay in his casket in the Alvarez hacienda, and tomorrow morning they would bury him. He remembered the haughty youth's cold impersonal glance when they had first met, there outside of Buenaventura when the Reed herders were moving sheep across the road. His thoughts ran a wide gamut, and in them was no pleasure.

Suddenly he wished this was settled, over with, for it hung across his shoulders with an invisible weight. And he knew that each of his riders felt that same unseen pressure. He had read it in their actions, their gruffness. He had put it squarely to them that noon.

"Any man who wants to can ride out, fellows. You're only workin' for wages, and me an' Rawhide each realize that you ain't got as much at stake as we have. We won't look upon your leavin' as an act of cowardice, but maybe as good sense."

They had been a grimly silent bunch. Finally the Texan had said, "Sam, I've bummed all my life. My papy died when I was a button an' I never did remember my mammy, 'cause she run off with a drummer, I believe. I've looked thirty odd years for a place I cottoned to, one I could like. I found it here. I like ol' Rawhide, damn his buttons, an' I like this crew. I'll be sidin' you, Black Hills man."

"Me, too," said another.

They all stayed. And Sam thanked them, a lump in his throat. Back at the Dutch oven, old Rawhide grumbled and swore to hide his emotions. Sam looked at the old man and saw him rub the corner of one eye with his dirty apron. Rawhide did not see Sam's slow smile.

Sam put his bronc to a walk, moving out of the shadows. A cow stood menacingly, and Sam smiled and said, "Save your speed, bossy. You got a long drive ahead of you."

The cow watched him pass, then fell to grazing. Sam circled the herd and then stopped at the barrier of twigs and trees constructed across the canyon's mouth. There was no wind and the moon was crystal white.

Sam rode a three hour trick, and then went into camp to wake up his relief man. Sleep came quickly, and the first thing he knew, old Rawhide was banging his pots around. They were going to leave the cattle in the box canyon and put their gather down into another gully, and when dusk came they would turn their day's gather in with the cattle in the canyon. That way, they all could ride range, and nobody would have to stay to hold the stock.

JOSE MARTINEZ and Sam worked as a pair again. With Sam combing the high ridges, and Martinez working the cattle down to lower ground after Sam had run them out of the brush, they were a good team of brush-working cowpunchers. But there were hardly any cattle.

And those that were in the brush were wild as jackrabbits. They'd hit the brush, horns back, running like deer; they'd leap over rotten logs, jump from rock to rock. One steer handled himself on rock as dexterously as a mountain goat.

But by the time they got down to where Jose Martinez rode, the steam was gone from them. And some had been run the day before until they were tired before they eluded the RB men, and this showed on them today, cutting down their endurance. One by one, stubborn or otherwise, they were being shoved into the herd that grew slowly down there in the gully.

Although the day was warm, the wind had a sharp chill. The sun inched higher, rather low in the southern part of the sky, where it rode at that time of the year. There was heat in it but the wind nullified the sun's efforts.

Sam looked at his watch. Ten o'clock. He got down and lit a cigarette, his back to some boulders for protection from the wind, the sun full on him. Martinez rode up and settled at his right, sitting flatly on the ground. He asked Sam for the time, and the man from the Black Hills told him.

"They have mass for Miguel now," the Mexican said quietly. He took off his flat Stetson and bowed his head. Sam could see his lips move but he could not hear his words. Martinez crossed himself and loked out on the Pacific, rolling in the blue distance. He was silent.

"The ocean looks rough," Sam said.

"There is a storm up north. See the big whitecaps from here, Sam? They tell of a storm coming. The wind she is cold, too. Too cold, even for this part of the year. This morning, when it was real clear, I could see the mountains north of Santa Barbara, the Sierra Madres, and there was some snow on them. A storm comes this way."

"Wish it would stay away. I'd like to have it clear tonight."

Martinez nodded. He understood. Sam wanted it moonlight so they could see clearly, and could tell foe from friend, if a gunfight broke loose.

They got into leather again. That afternoon the storm hit them. Rain fell madly, whipped in from the sea by a strong wind. It beat against rocks and trees, and the wind bent the live-oaks and the junipers.

The earth was wet, and slippery. Broncs fell and slid; cattle ran wildly. Still the rain came roaring down. You could only see a few feet ahead of you. Rain blanketed the peaks from view, hit the pounding ocean. But you could hear the Pacific, snarling against the rocks.

They pulled the crew in and held the cattle, giving up the gather temporarily. They hunkered under heavy live-oaks or under the wagon and smoked and talked. Sam felt a sullen, ugly anger toward the weather. He had hoped for a clear night and now—

"Think they'll still load?" a man asked.

Old Rawhide answered that. "They'll still load, fellow. This is good weather to steal cattle. With this storm, it stands to reason that no riders would be nosin' around. An' Malone can't afford to stick aroun' this island; it's too risky for him. Yeah, they'll load."

They were silent.

Sam lay back and smoked a cigarette. Rawhide was right, he figured. This was good weather for rustling cattle.

The odds were all in favor of Reed now.

19

REED RODE into his *rancho*, rain dripping from the brim his hat. He said to the mozo, "Grain the bronc good, and put my kak on that big dun yonderly." He went to the house, the storm wrapping his dark slicker around his thick body. The door closing behind him shut out the smash of the rain,

Nick Blake had a rifle apart by the fireplace where the pinon knots burned with a dark heat. He looked up and said, "Good cow-stealin' weather, huh?'

"Our weather, Blake."

Reed took off his southwester and handed it to Shanghai, who took it to the kitchen to dry it in front of the stove. Blake oiled the mechanism of the rifle, fitted it together.

"Think you'll need that, Blake?"

Blake jacked the mechanism back and forth. The magazine was empty, so no cartridges went into the barrel. He clicked the hammer and punched shells into the magazine. "A man never knows, Reed. He knows damn' little what a dark, rough night holds for him...."

Shanghai came with a cup of hot coffee. Reed went down in the arm chair and put his boots up to the fire. Shanghai went back to his kitchen.

Blake jacked a bullet into the barrel and slid the safety on catch. He placed the rifle butt-down and leaned it against the rock fireplace. He looked flatly at Eno Reed.

"Well, what's in the wind, Reed?"

"Rain, and plenty of it."

Blake waited, feeling impatience.

Reed said, "I came from the lookout. They buried Miguel this morning. A boatload of Alvarez mourners returned to Buenaventura, leaving about noon. They're in town by now."

Blake nodded.

"Some of the friends stayed for a day or so, I guess. That means that Don Pablo will have company tonight when we raid RB cattle."

Blake felt a measure of relief. "The kid's kept his mouth shut, then. He

died with his secret." He remembered a dark alley, and a gun talking in it, and he remembered Miguel falling. He felt a tinge of horror creep across him. But he had had to do it. His neck had been in danger. This game was dog eat dog. You had to be suspicious and shoot to kill; otherwise you were dead. Hanged from a makeshift gallows, or from some wind-tossed oak, or dead under the pound of lead. That was it—you had to kill, to keep breathing good air.

Blake asked, "And the RB men?"

"Out on roundup, every mother's son of them. The squaw has left the *rancho,* and the old mozo left right before the storm, heading around the mountain for the roundup camp. That means the home ranch is deserted, 'cause even the kid is gone."

"We'll ride west of there," murmured Blake. He walked to the window and looked out at the rain. It beat against the window, the wind pushing it against the pane. "And the RB cattle?"

"They're gentle stock, But you know that. Anyway, they're close together, and this wind will drive them to the south tip, where we want them." He put his fingers together to build an apex and then studied his nails. "Things look all right to me."

Blake walked to the fireplace. He put his hands behind his back and warmed himself. "Would be better if we had guards out to watch the camp, just to make sure there was nothin' wrong? But a guard couldn't see anything in this weather, anyway. We got one man out, haven't we?'

"We pick him up at the gully." said Reed.

BLAKE sat down. Shanghai came in with some whiskey and two glasses. Blake drank; so did Reed. Blake poured another drink and glanced inquiringly at Eno Reed, who shook his head.

"Not now, Blake. Don't hit it too heavy, *amigo.*"

"I know my limits," growled Blake.

Reed's eyes were suddenly sharp at Blake's hard tone. But the flintiness died and Reed got a book from the bookcase. He opened it to his marker and settled lower in his chair.

Blake said, "Your nerves are steel, man."

Reed looked up. "No, I just hide it, that's all. Check on things at the barn and bunkhouse, huh?"

Blake put on his southwester and went into the rain. Through the window Reed could watch the man go to the barn, bent against the storm. He laid the book down and stared in to the fire. He was sitting there, looking at the pinons smolder, when Blake came back.

"The men are set, Reed. The mozo has the broncs saddled. They've been grained good and have et hay all day. The next thing to think about is Shane Malone. Will he be there—will Gyuado get word to him?"

"Shane'll be there."

Blake studied him. "What makes you so sure?'

"I know Shane Malone. He's a thief, through and through. He's as black as the inside of a stovepipe. He has no respect for man or gawd, or for himself. He'll be there 'cause there'll be money for him. And money is Gawd Almighty to Shane Malone. Word's got to him by this time."

"Hope you're right."

Reed smiled a little. "Hit the bottle again, Nick." He went back to his book.

Blake went to the bunkhouse.

DUSK CAME early. They rode with the rain, a compact group of men, and they single-footed broncs along the trail, silent in their thoughts. Reed took the lead, and Blake rode behind his boss, and the other riders followed, in file on the mountain trail.

Gear made a little noise as boots settled against stirrups. One man had chains on his briddle-reins and his broncs tossed his head now and then, making the chains issue a low musical sound. For some reason, the sound irritated Nick Blake.

He was jumpy, he realized. He had to watch his nerves. But he'd been jumpy ever since he had shot down Miguel Alvarez. When he had lifted

his rifle, his muscles had been rock-silent, his nerves buried beneath his concentration. But they had broken right after that. And although he tried to pull them together, to tie them into a hard, compact mass, he had not succeeded.

The dusk changed to darkness. and still the rain kept falling. And the wind was just as strong. Usually when the sun went down the wind abated for a spell, but such was not the case on this night.

Reed said, "Hell of a night."

Somewhere breakers were smashing against the rocky coast. The sound made a continuous roar in the distance.

"Rough on the sea," Blake allowed.

"Rough on the land, too."

One man said, "I wish I had a cigarette."

No answer.

They reached a wild, lonesome gully. There they met the scout. They gathered under the live-oaks and listened to him. RB men were all on roundup. He'd got down close to the camp and had seen them there. Even the mozo was over from the *rancho*. The RB cattle were down toward the south point.

"See anything of any boats?" asked Reed.

"Yeah, sure did. Saw Shane Malone's skiff come in, just afore the storm busted. Or anyway, looked like his'n."

Reed rubbed his cold hands together. He said, "Light cigarettes, men. Nobody can see us down in this brush; nobody aroun' but us, nohow."

Matches flared, died. One man cursed as he tried to light his cigarette. Another said, "Face the wind, fellow," and then the coals of their smokes glowed in the dark, growing brighter as they pulled in on them, growing dim as they exhaled.

They sat there for about ten minutes; then the cigarettes went down into the mud. They rode out. Now they set a faster pace. A bold pace that led them back of the RB hacienda, found them skirting the haystacks of native wild hay. And Reed still pushed at the lead, with Nick Blake pounding behind him two paces, and the rest of the men strung out behind.

They were old to this, for they had done it many times before. Blake told himself that; still, he found no consolation in the fact. Premonitions pulled at the bearded man, pulsing through him warningly. He tried to shrug off the spell that seemed to have cast itself around his shoulders.

Blake was cold. He wished it were over. He wished he were home in bed, back where it was warm. The world was wet, cold, clammy. They heard breakers smash against rock.

THE RAIN was coming now in short, angry bursts. It would rain slowly for a few minutes, then break loose and whip water at them. The wind was raw, cutting through their oilskin slickers. They all wore dark slickers and they all had saddles on dark-colored horses.

Now the RB hacienda was behind. Blake though, "There'll be no tracks. This rain'll wash them all away." That was good. Cattle were fat there and the price would be good. He found himself figuring that back in the mountains, in the States, he used to work two years, and work hard, for the amount of money he would make that night, in the next few hours.

Those thoughts cheered him.

They pulled in once again, opposite the point where they were originally going to hit, and they held a brief conversation back in the rocks. This time they did not light cigarettes. Blake pushed some raw tobacco into his mouth and chewed it thoughtfully listening to Reed's low guttural words.

Reed outlined their plan of precedure. With this storm, it would be harder to run out cattle, but they'd point them south, and the stock would drift ahead of the storm. If some turned back, let them turn. No use trying to head them in that rainstorm.

"And besides," Reed said, "there are plenty of cattle here. By the time we get to the point, we'll have more than a boatload. I know that."

"Tough night," said a rider.

Reed said, "We could wait an hour or two. The storm might break by then, Shane Malone will wait. You want to do that?'

"You got nerves made out of piano wire," growled Nick Blake. "Me, I get this over with; get this bunch of horns on board ship, then drift back to our sougans. Might just as well work cattle in the rain as sit still an' let it run down your neck."

"He's said my words," stated a rider.

Reed said, "A night when the witches could brew hell in their cauldrons," and he thought again of *Macbeth*.

NICK BLAKE got the sudden impression that horses were moving, out there in the night. He would have sworn he heard the clink of a spur rowel. But he knew that wasn't possible. RB men slept in wet blankets miles across the range. And how could a man hear anything but the hellish whine of the wind, the roaring pour of the rain?

The wind broke in mad glee, bending the tips of the junipers until they touched the ground. It roared through the rocks, whistling in maniacal jibberings. Then it died again, and it fell in somber monotony.

"Well," asked Reed, "do we work cattle?'

They all wanted to work cattle. They wanted this over with. Reed gave them instructions and they rode off the night swallowing them. One minute, thought Blake they were sittin' their broncs beside me. The next the night opened up and gulped them down.

Blake felt the eerieness of the situation. A cold spot seemed to form along his spine.

He and Eno Reed were alone.

"An' me?" asked Blake. "What do I do Eno?'

"We ride together, Nick.'

Blake nodded. He spat tobacco juice with the wind. Then suddenly he grabbed the slicker sleeve of the big Eno Reed.

"What was that, Eno?"

Out on the ocean, a few miles away, a light had flashed suddenly. One blinding short flash, then the light had been killed. It had come from the point where even now Shane Malone was supposed to be anchored, boat pulled close to the rocks, the gangplank down to receive stolen cattle.

"Only Malone. That's his signal to show us he is there."

Blake scowled in the dark. "Didn't figure he had such a bright carbide light on his scull," he murmured. "That light looked brighter than the one he flashed the last time."

"Maybe he bought a new one," growled Reed.

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SAM BLANDING had also seen the flash. He and his riders were three miles south of the RB hacienda.

"Searchlight, looked like." Sam spoke slowly. "Down on the point, ain't it, Rawhide?'

"Looked thataway to me, Sam."

"What does it mean?" Don Pablo Alvarez spoke hurriedly.

They had reined their broncs under a spreading live-oak tree. They had just ridden into position beneath the tree's wide branches. The way Sam figured, they were right west of the point where Reed was supposed to load cattle. But the flash of light had come from the south.

"Mebbe it was one of them fallin' stars that hit the water," a rider said.

"We could have seen it fall," stated Jose Martinez.

Sam said slowly, "There's something wrong here, men. They ain't loadin' cattle at this point, an' I'll tell you why. When I talked with the Coast Guard man, he said that if Shane Malone's ship was anchored at another spot—other than this one—he would give me a signal, showing where the ship was located."

Rawhide asked, "An' you think that's the signal, button?"

"That was it," stated Sam. "I'm positive. He told me they had new carbide lights on their boat, new ones they had just installed. They was the

brightest the gever'ment had. And that was an awful bright light."

"Anyway you can signal back?" asked Don Pablo.

Sam shook his head. "None. They will prob'ly only flash it that once. But let's do a little scouting around, huh, to make sure?"

Back at the roundup wagon, they had held a long confab. The result was that Sam had been chosen as leader. They were to obey his every rule, although they might not agree with his judgment. Now they crowded around close, men on good horses, and listened to his plan.

They would have to spread out and hit, man to man. And how could they identify their own comrades in the dark, wind-swept night? They agreed on two watchwords: Pronto and Caballo. They would shout these, if the fight got going too thick, and they would know the man doing the hollering was an RB rider.

"Spread out, men. Me an' Rawhide will take the center. Come down on this point, and if they ain't there, we swing south toward the light. All set, hombres?"

"*Si Senor* Sam."

Don Pablo Alvarez rode close. He put his hand on Sam's forearm, his fingers touch through the oilskin slicker. "*Vaya con Dios, amigo mio.* Go you with God, *Senor,*" His voice was husky. "There is a man I want to kill tonight. Those are harsh words, but it is my duty."

Sam was silent.

Men were moving into the rain that swallowed them from Sam's sight. Already Rawhide Hinton was riding off with, "Good shootin', younker, an' I hope you got the eye for sights that your pappy had."

TEN MINUTES later, they met beside the ocean. They were a little puzzled, for there were no cattle there, nor Reed riders. Sam curbed his rearing bronc.

"That light was our signal. They're down at the point of the island. That was the signal from the Coast Guard."

They hit their spurs, riding fast through the slippery footing. They carried rifles and had sixguns strapped outside their slickers. The distance, Sam figured, was five miles, maybe a little longer. And they had to get there before Reed loaded the cattle. Or was there cattle being loaded on the point?

Maybe Reed and Blake had changed their minds about hitting the RB herd. Maybe, because of the dark, rain-driven night, they had postponed their intended raid. He was filled with conjecture and doubt. For that matter, maybe the information given by the dead Miguel Alvarez had been false.

But what, and who, had caused the light to shine out, there on the ocean? Was it from a fishing boat, an innocent craft carrying sardine fishermen? And maybe it hadn't been meant to be a signal.

These and other doubts tugged at Sam Blanding. Well, soon he and his riders would know whether that light had been a signal, or just the flash of a light from a fishing boat. Sometimes fishermen carried bright carbide lights to shine against the rocky shore so that they could judge the distance from it while they dropped anchor and went down for abalones.

They came around the jutting outcrop of rock, riders slanting their bodies against the drive of the wind. A horse fell and a man went down, cursing in a thin, high voice that the wind swept away. Sam reined and rode back, but the man was back in leather again.

Again Sam drove to the head of the riders. They were close to the point, and they were spreading out. They pulled in and listened. Cattle were moving and somewhere a bullwhip cracked.

"Cattle movin'," growled old Rawhide Hinton. "Ahead of us, on the point. Dang it, son, that light was a signal!"

"But it is so dark," said Don Pablo.

They sat saddles, wet and cold and tense, and listened. Somewhere men were talking; the words were indistinct, riding the wind.

Sam raised his .45. He said, "When

I fire, the Coast Guard men play their carbide lights across the scene. Now spread out about fifty yards apart, get your guns ready, and I'll count to fifty, givin' you time to get to positions."

SAM COUNTED slowly. Time dragged by. A cow moved by, running wildly in the dark. He heard brush crackle. He wished the storm would break. His tongue was dry, hanging to his palate, and he ran it over his lips, getting rain from them. Forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven—

Fifty!

His .45 blasted lead and flame into the night. Out on the sea, hoods were jerked from lighted searchlights, sending blinding, carbide-made light across the rocks, piercing the rain and wind.

The lights were grouped to cover a wide area of the land. The tension broke and ran out of Sam, for this was the end of the cow war. There on the rocks, in the roaring, wind-bent pines, the last act would be played.

The scene was cameo-etched on his vision. Cattle moving, running toward the sea, riders after them. And the ship of Shane Malone, gangplank down, and cattle moving into the bowels of the vessel.

Evidently the Coast Guard men had come in three boats, for it looked like the lights were from three independent sources. They were out on the rocky hook, a hundred yards beyond Malone's ship.

"A trap!" a Reed man screamed. "We're run into a trap, boss!"

Guns were talking now, breaking the cold deadliness of the pale light. The wind smashed in, cut across the sodden pound of bullets. Horses reared and spurs found home, and six-guns spoke.

Sam rode forward, his short-gun talking. He wasted not a shell. The whole thing was a mad, unreal scene, there on the lonely, rocky shore. Riders were moving across the night.

"Pronto!"

"Caballo!"

The cries rang out. Somewhere a rifle talked a leaden, quick parley. A rider came up, swinging toward Sam, who called, *"Caballo,* hombre!"

Sam's answer consisted of a roar from the man's pistol. Sam dropped out of his saddle, not even hearing the whine of the man's lead because of the storm. He had his Winchester out and the lever jacked in a new shell. Yonderly the man's bronc ran with an empty saddle, stirrups swinging freely in his wild run.

A mad roar, evidently made by a small cannon, rocked in Sam's ears. He saw a large jagged flame spout from the deck of Shane Malone's ship. So the rustler had a cannon on board, huh?

A rider moved by, firing as he went, and Sam felt his saddle-fork jerk under the impact of lead. He fired twice with his rifle, but it was difficult to handle the long gun on horseback, and he knew he had missed.

"Pronto!"

"Caballo!"

SAM RECOGNIZED old Rawhide Hinton's warhoop. Cattle were stampeding, running back toward the mountains. Terrified, tails up, heads down, they headed into the wild rain. With light from only two Coast Guard ships, the scene was not so bright.

Sam knew it would be over soon. It was too terrible, too cold-blooded, to run very long. Somewhere he heard a man holler, "I give up! Don't shoot!" and Jose Martinez bellowed, "Throw your *pistola* down, hombre! Get off the *caballo* an' stand with the hands up!"

Sam wondered where Eno Reed was. For that matter, he'd not seen Nick Blake, either. But it was hard to identify riders in that light.

Suddenly the sea was broken by a wild explosion. Sam pulled in; his bronc protested against his bit. Shane Malone's ship had been blasted right in two. Now it rose, spars and timbers shooting high, and then it collapsed into the sea. One end of it stuck up.

That was the end of it. Ten minutes later, the remaining Reed men were lined up against a big rock, the lights from the Coast Guard vessel bright on their upraised hands Sam

got out of saddle and walked over to where Rawhide held his rifle on the men. Reed and Blake were not in the line-up. A Coast Guard man stood beside Rawhide.

"You blew up Malone's ship, huh?"

"A torpedo, Sam."

Sam said, "Sure raised hell with it. Any of the crew left livin'?"

Two of the Malone men had survived the blasting. They were huddled on the beach, A Coast Guard man over them with a rifle. Sam wondered where Malone's body was. "There's a dead man down yonder on the beach," the Coast Guard man said

Sam looked at the man, then at Don Pablo Alvarez, who stood beside him. "That's Malone," the don said slowly.

"He'll never load another stolen cow."

The don had blood on his forearm. "My arm, it is broken, *senor.* I can feel that." His face, under the harsh light, was lined with deep sorrow.

Sam asked slowly, "Nick Blake?"

'He is back there, under the rocks. Forty feet away from Blake's body is Eno Reed. You knocked him from his saddle."

"I didn't recognize him," said Sam.

ONE OF the RB cowpunchers was dead. One of the Reed riders, along with Reed and Blake, would never ride another horse. Sam walked to where Jose Martinez sat flatly under a rock, blood on his thigh.

"The bullet, she run through my meat." The Mexican inhaled deeply on his *cigaro.* "You were a lucky hombre, *amigo.* For a lead smashed the fork of your *ensillado,* no?" He winced in pain, both hands tight above his wound.

Rawhide Hinton had taken some bandages along, and the Coast Guard man and he patched up the survivors as best they could. They would take them to Buenaventura for more thorough treatment. They carred Jose Martinez down the gangplank onto the Coast Guard vessel.

"You had best go, too," Sam said to Don Pablo.

But the old man shook his head. "The man has set my arm, Sam. Only the one bone, he said, had been broken. He has washed it out with something that really burned—If you rode home alone, without me, and Anza and my wife saw you come alone—You understand, *hijo?*"

Sam nodded. They would think Don Pablo had been killed. And right after losing Miguel—Sam walked to where Nick Blake lay, The Coast Guard man said, "He's dead, Sam," and Sam walked to where a man sat against a rock head slack on his chest. He hunkered and lifted the man's head. He was Eno Reed.

For a second, Sam looked at the dead man's face, a great reverence inside of him. Death had taken the lust, the terrible drive, from Reed's lips. Death had flattened out the hard planes of his face, giving him a peaceful appearance.

Sam straightened, a lump in his throat.

He was standing there silent and filled with pain when the Coast Guard captain came up.

"If you wish, Sam, we will take over here."

Sam looked at him gratefully. "Thanks, sir."

Rawhide Hinton rode up, leading his horse. Don Pablo was already in the saddle. Sam found his stirrup, went up.

Don Pablo said, "We ride to my hacienda, *amigos.*"

Rawhide was silent. Sam was silent. The rain fell back a little. They rode north through it, three men dressed in black slickers. Three men who had gone through a bloody night they would never forget.

Don Pablo said, "My daughter will wait to see you come home, Sam. She will be waiting for you."

Sam said, "And I'm glad for that, sir. I'm very, very glad."

THE END

Proud Killers Of Tonto

by Cliff Campbell

(Author of "Crib of Destiny")

Just about everybody in Tonto was ready and eager to admit to the killing of old Luke Lamont!

THE HEART-stopping smile that Mary Lamont had for but one man faded from her wide, brown eyes. She was a long minute trying to bring herself to believe that Dave Carr, whose angular, bony face was among the homeliest in Tonto Basin, was speaking the grim truth. That he had dynamited the placer creek flume.

"No, it couldn't have been you, not you, Dave," was all she said before she fell silent and her generous mouth slowly changed from a curve to a whitening straight line.

He didn't speak again for the minute, giving her time to see the truth in his sun-washed blue eyes, in the set of his long jaw. He only pushed back his thick light hair, faded of

all color by years of the old devil desert sun, and waited, watching her soft throat throb with the speeded beating of her pulse.

Then Dave's slow, heavy voice struck the girl. She was small and slim and her body swayed away as if his few words had been a physical blow.

"I guess it's right enough known I'm the only hardrock creek claimer in the basin," he said as if each word pulled a nerve. "I couldn't do other than set the blast. Luke had me figured the minute he set eyes onto how his high-line rock flume from the dam had been busted. It was one spot that would make it so nothing could ever be done to steal Tonto Creek from them fifty or more claimers he ain't so far been able to run off their property."

It was the longest speech Mary had heard come from Dave Carr's always mocking, cynical mouth. But nearly always Dave's twisting lips showed an amused smile that seemed to make his eyes crinkle over some secret joke. Now his mouth and eyes were hard.

Mary Lamont's heart-shaped face held a sudden grayish pallor under its smooth tan. She brushed tangled black curls from an ear with one small hand, as if she wasn't hearing rightfully.

At her movement, Dave repeated what he had first told her when she met him, as had become their recent custom, for a sundown ride over one of the trails above the basin. They had dismounted and were looking down upon the lamplight beginning to break out from the hundred-odd cabins along the Tonto Basin slopes.

"Yeah, Mary, I ain't kissed you and it wouldn't be fitten, seein' I have no choice," his wide shoulders moving as if he had to use sheer muscular strength to form each word. "It's kill or be killed, and I ain't hankerin' for either. That's why I'm leaving the basin for good and all."

She had to look up at his ruggedly ugly features. Her voice was hoarse and low, and it could have been from either anger or disillusionment.

"You didn't ask me to go with you, so why didn't you just up and go?"

"I intended doin' that, but when I saw you ridin' over the trail bridge, I had to tell you, Mary. I couldn't ask you to go, on account of *my* claim ain't one the dynamitin' will keep out of Luke's hands. I'm grubstaked only to hit the desert again."

THE GIRL'S wide, brown eyes had been skeptical, then they had turned agate hard, and now they were suddenly suffused with a new light. Her head was tilted and a slow, warm smile curved her lips. She cried out then, her hands reaching.

"Meanin', Dave honey, *we're* grubstaked to hit the desert, if it's how you want it, you big ugly, blind fool! You think I'd let you ride out of my life like that, 'less you'd say you didn't want me? All of Tonto Basin's maybe wonderin', the same as you've said you have, how I could love you and want you?"

Dave's usual cynical grin began to erase the taut lines of his twisted mouth. He was shaking his head slowly.

"Luke Lamont's your father, Mary, an' so you didn't savvy how it could be me that blew up the flume that's taken more than half of all the gold panned from the richest claims in Tonto Creek."

"My foster father, Dave," she corrected. "and you know it. He's been a claim jumpin' thief ever since I've come to know him, which is only after bein' away five years at school. I couldn't believe you hit this Tonto Basin scheme, but now I have heard bits of talk and that makes it sound reasonable. When you first told me, I could think only that you didn't want me, then—"

She caught his homely face between her hands and kissed him.

"I was told about the Pearsons, and how Pearson has a family on the way to this God-forsaken place, but Luke grabbed all of his claim, or would if the flume hadn't been blown up. And it was how Jim Pearson lost one hand, saving you from a blizzard. And there's the Gus Andersons and the Pasquale houseful, and how you

pardnered with Anderson and the Mex—"

Dave Carr's hand, rough and big enough to have covered all of her pretty face, clamped upon her mouth.

"Folks talk too damn' much in Tonto Basin," he growled. "It can't be like you say, Mary. Luke's hog rich an' figgers to marry you!"

Her anger tore what was almost a scream from her throat.

"Don't tell me about that! Don't ever mention it again! If you won't wait until I'm ready, tomorrow night, I'll run off and try trailin' you! I know the desert—"

Dave cut her off abruptly. "Maybe, tomorrow night," he said in a low tone. "Not on this trail. At Cougar Pass. We'll hit west into Nevada. Now go, and don't look around. There is some'n skulking over in them aspen bushes."

IT WAS too dark for Dave to spot the skulker clearly, but in the moonlight it appeared the man might have been Jim Pearson. He was the only man in the Tonto Basin who shaded a dwarf-size of less than five feet.

Big Dave breathed easier when the skulker scurried away. Jim Pearson had a locoed idea of looking out for Dave Carr. Since the smashing of Luke Lamont's creek-stealing scheme to grab all of Tonto Basin's well paying claims, Pearons had stuck to Dave's trail most of the time, armed with a .45 that seemed to weigh him sidewise.

Dave Carr debated the whole situation when Mary had ridden away. By damming Tonto Creek above the hundred or more claims in the basin, the smart, dudish Luke Lamont had forced claimers to pay heavily for the water run from his high-line flume. That he was hated by virtually all of Tonto Basin didn't ruffle Lamont.

The basin boss had imported gunslicks and there had been two killings before some claimers paid up for water, while others were finally run out of the basin. Dave Carr's dangerously smart move marked him for death.

Playing into Lamont's claim stealing scheme, Tonto Basin was a recent discovery in the southwestern corner of Utah, a flash gold town in the broiling desert, forgotten by God, inhabited by kin to the devil and not yet discovered by the law. Dave Carr, with Abe Roth, the blacksmith; Al Jones, doctor and coroner and sometimes judge of a basin commitee; Kale Carson, who raised beef and hog meat for the basin, made up such law as there was in Tonto. There being no riparian rights on Tonto Creek, a wayward, uncertain stream, Luke Lamont's creek flume broke no book law.

DAVE CARR knew Lamont who also owned the *Only Place* saloon, had at least half a dozen gunnies among supposed gravelers in the creek claims he had jumped. Dave had studied the high-line flume, which had carried all of the water dammed up from Tonto Creek? He planted four full cases of dynamite before he blasted the Lamont grab for the fifty-odd richest claims in the lower basin.

Dave didn't have to be told that he was marked for boothill. It was in the air, Lamont had known Dave Carr was the basin's only hardrock man, and Lamont had also resented Dave's winning of his foster daughter. Tonto Basin folks knew Dave to be four-square, but why his desert-warped, rugged face could appeal to pretty Mary Lamont was a miracle, more so to Dave Carr than any other person.

It might have been the sharp contrast between Dave and Luke Lamont, a matter of a homely, slow-talking, honest man against a flashy, crooked, fine looking thief and practically gun boss of the basin. Leastwise, Dave Carr was juggling a notion of hitting out alone as he came into Tonto's crooked main street, with its many lanes leading to slope cabins. He wanted to be fair to Mary.

Dropping in on Anderson, once a partner, Dave stepped out of his customary habits. He had made sure his .45 was slick in its leather. He stayed for dinner and afterward joined An-

derson killing a bottle of Lamont's rotgut.

Dave was dizzied more than a steady drinker would have been. When he started for his cabin, he was less watchful than he should have been, knowing Lamont gunnies might be on the prowl. Dave had a quick gun hand when he needed it, and as the main street now was deserted, he kept an eye upon the openings of the several dark cabin lanes. But a few drinks had blurred his vision.

He was close to his own claim cabin. Several riders from the Kale Carson beef ranch went by, whooping it up for home, and gun-smoke blossomed as an occasional exuberant cowhand blazed away at the full moon.

Dave was watching the riders when he was pulled around suddenly. There was no mistaking the white vest and other dudish duds of Luke Lamont. To Dave it seemed evident that Lamont himself had lain in wait for him. He came from the alley into the moonlight with his gun glittering in his hand.

The distance was less than thirty feet and not a word had been spoken. Dave had no time for thinking it over. Lamont's gun was covering him at pointblank range. Dave drew and fired from the hip level in a blur of motion.

Dodging instinctively to one side, Dave thumbed the hammer a second time. Then he realized Lamont's gun hadn't exploded. The Tonto Basin claim jumping boss appeared to be knocked backward. He flattened and, on guard, Dave jumped toward him, his gun ready for a third shot.

HALF A minute later Dave Carr was back in the street. He had found Lamont as dead as he would ever be. In the darkness Dave paused only long enough to make sure Lamont's heart had no beat. There was no showing where his own lead had stopped Lamont almost instantly. Dave didn't waste time looking for the wounds. He did open Lamont's six to make sure no shell had exploded.

Dave could've easily discharged Lamont's gun, but that wasn't his way. In his own conscience he was clear on the point that Lamont had planned to gulch him, but had found his gun jammed or he hadn't been too sure he was Dave Carr. He left the gun with Lamont.

"Hafta tell it like as it was," said Dave to himself then moved his big, ungainly body with catlike agility seldom found in so big a man.

Dave saw Jim Pearson's small figure crossing the street. The little man had a weazened face, all Irish. He had but part of his left hand. That was the result of Pearson having brought Dave Carr through a 30-below blizzard when Dave had busted a leg.

There was some more shooting at the moon as another pair of Kale Carson's likkered cowhands forked their horses down by Luke Lamont's saloon. Jim Pearson vanished between two buildings. His heavy .45 seemed to cause his small body to sag, but Pearson was tougher to the inch than any other jigger in Tonto Basin.

Dave debated quickly what he should do. His voice was slow, and always two jumps behind his thinking. He didn't so much as consider evading the truth, that he had shot Lamont twice and the Tonto Basin creek flume owner hadn't triggered.

Kale Carson himself came out of Lamont's saloon then. The beef raiser for Tonto was tall, hawk-nosed, but so bowlegged from living in a saddle he looked short. Carson was starting up the plank walk toward Dave, evidently going to Joel Bowden's general store.

Dave's shack of slab pine was just across the small creek, now ashine with running water. Dave ducked across, wanting a minute or so to think, and to get shed of the bit of rough quartz Gus Anderson had surprised him with during his visit.

DAVE, FOR all of his size and roughly lived years, was shaken. Not before Luke Lamont had he ever killed a man. In spite of his open stealing of Tonto Basin gold, in

charging for water, Lamont had not committed a crime, for which the law could hold him.

There would be no evidence but Dave's word for it that Lamont had rushed him with his gun already drawn. Many who had been robbed and others who hadn't, disliked Lamont. But that didn't justify a killing.

"An' there's double cause for me tellin' it pronto, like it was," said Dave with bitter irony. "First off, this makes it wrongful for me to think any more about some day havin' Mary. And there's this."

Dave was examining the heavy, rough quartz in the lamplight. He had entered his shack suddenly from the rear, gun in hand, and made as sure as he could in the moonlight that this hadn't been a two-way gulching trap. A Lamont gunnie might have been hidden in the shack, but he did not appear.

Practically all of Dave's worldly goods were packed to hit the desert trails again. And here it was. This bit of quartz had come from a ledge that Gus Anderson had uncovered under a wash pocket.

"The way she slants, I'm opinin' that quartz cuts through your claim, Dave," had been Anderson's word. "Had a report from the assayer at Ogden, an' our creek pockets ain't nothin' but chicken feed to this, the way I figure that quartz. I've drilled into it nigh halfway along the basin, an' if Lamont had hit it he'd have passed up his measly water toll and brought in a whole army of gun slammers to run us out."

Hefting the quartz, Dave's slow grin was humorless.

"All the more reason I'll be maybe reachin' middle age lookin' through the bars o' the pen at Salt Lake," said Dave grimly. "If I hadn't been some fogged up an' too damn' fast with my shootin', maybe Lamont was only figurin' on holdin' me long enough to have a palaver over Mary."

NOT MANY men had the honest streak in Dave Carr. He'd risked his life to help his neighbors, but he hadn't been befooled any as to Lamont's intentions toward his foster daughter.

Most other Tonto folks had the same notion, that Lamont had really raised Mary to some day before long add some luster to his growing fortune, stolen though it might be.

"I'm wishin' I'd hit out for the old devil desert before tonight," said Dave. "But I'll hafta lay down all the cards. I killed Luke Lamont, and it means losin' Mary, but I can't light a shuck an' leave suspicion maybe fallin' onto some'n he's slicked outta his gold claim."

The gold quartz was hidden. Dave Carr tramped heavily onto the porch of Bowden's general store. Better to tell of the killing here where those that had tried with little success to keep a measure of law and order nearly always met.

Big Dave Carr braced himself. He had seen Kale Carson, the rancher, head for the store. Abe Roth, the blacksmith, and Al Jones, the doctor and coroner, would be lounging, around as usual, none being drinkers or customers at Lamont's saloon. Unless Al Jones had a sick call.

Dave knew, from the lack of excitement, that Luke Lamont's body had not been discovered. He was surprised now to find only Bowden in the store. Bowden had a chirpy voice that went with his chubby face and the only sideburns in Tonto.

"Howdy, Dave," greeted Bowden. "Glad to see some'n come in. Since Lamont's flume was blasted to hell, seems as how everybody's stayin' away from everybody else, on account o' maybe makin' a mistake and namin' the smart jasper that done it."

Bowden had eyes that rolled until the whites showed when he wanted folks to think he knew more than he was telling. Dave had his broad mouth cornered, but he said only, "Nobody on town committee been around tonight?"

"Nope—danged peculiar, s e e i n' there's likely to be hell poppin' when Lamont runs in a few more gunslicks," chirped Bowden.

"But Lamont won't be runnin' in no more gunnies!" boomed a deep voice. "He was soundin' off how I'd

know who blowed up his flume, an' when I called him he went for his iron! He's up in the lane alongside the saddle shop! Lamont's had it comin' so long, I'm proud I done it!"

Abe Roth, the blacksmith was as brawny and big as his voice. He wore black whiskers always showing a brown singe of hot iron. Joel Bowden gulped for air and Dave Carr tried to catch Roth's black eyes, but the smithy was scooping crackers from a barrel.

"Lookit, Roth—" Dave got that far when the door slammed open and Kale Carson clumped in heavily.

ABE ROTH didn't usually tote a gun, but he was taking an old revolver from his belt and shoving it into his coat pocket. Kale Carson halted inside the door, shoved his big hat back and wiped sweat from a forehead topped by red hair.

"It wasn't enough fer that polecat Lamont to rob hardworkin' creek washers, but he has to try tellin' me I'm havin' to pay for Tonto Creek water for my beef ranch or he'll cut us dry—an' then when I told him where he could go to c'llect, he went for his hogleg!" Kale Carson rushed his speech like he had to get it off his chest. "Makin' it short an' sweet, he hadn't oughter tried what he's payin' tough gunjammers to do. Dangnation! I don't have no bad conscience, but I wisht he'd triggered anyhow 'fore I drilled him plumb center!"

Dave started to speak again, but the thick brows of Smithy Roth drew his blackish face to a ferocious scowl.

"I'm hatin' to call ary man a liar, Carson, but damned if you're gittin' credit for feedin' lead pizen to that claim stealin' scorpion!" Roth's bass voice rattled tinned goods on the shelves. "We're of a size, so shuck your hardware, Carson. I kilt Lamont, an' he was dead when you come onto his corpse. You thinkin' the town'll give you a bigger beef contract for salivatin' Lamont?"

"But Roth! Carson! Both o' you are on the town committee, an' you can't nowise start a row over who shot Lamont—"

Dave Carr's slow voice spparently was unheard. The big smithy and the giant redheaded rancher rushed and smashed at each other. Neither had any smattering of hand fighting. Both swung iron-hard fists, and blows that would have knocked down a bull thudded into Roth's and Carson's guarding arms and shoulders.

Then Carson got through a lucky punch that smashed the nose of the smithy and set him on his hunkers. Dave started to move in to end it, when little Jim Pearson bobbed through the door. He looked at Joel Bowden.

"I thought Roth an' Carson was allus friends, so what in hell they battin' each other for?" demanded Pearson, his weazened face screwed into a knot.

"Both o' them is claimin' they shot Luke Lamont," chirped Bowden.

Big Dave Carr was getting between the combatants. He was trying to make them listen. Jim Pearson's thin voice yelled on a high note.

"Shot Lamont, ye blaggards?" spilled from little Jim Pearson. "When I nailed him cold turkey with his smokepole wavin' right under my nose! If either of ye seen Lamont, he was laid out cold an' stiff nigh the saddle shop! Lamont was aimin' to gulch Dave Carr, I guess, on account o' that flume blowup—"

GUS ANDERSON was tall and thin. His Adam's apple jumped when he talked. It was evident he had taken on an overload of forty-rod. Anderson was bareheaded, blond hair falling into his eyes. His .45 was still gripped in his hand. He staggered into the store.

"Heard what you said, Pearson, 'bout Lamont layin' to shoot Dave Carr in the back," said Anderson thickly. "But he ain't layin' to kill nobody now. He's layin' stiff an' cold up the street. I was trailin' Dave, seein' I knowed Lamont had found out Mary was aimin' to leave Tonto Basin with Dave."

Anderson hung onto a pickle barrel to stand erect.

"An' Dave had that quartz—"

Keeping his body between Abe Roth and Kale Carson, Dave tried

to turn off Anderson's tipsy give-away.

"Sure, Gus, I've still got the quart at my shack," he cut in. "It's damn' belly burnin' rotgut, but let's go have a drink. It's high-power forty-rod to make you think you killed Luke Lamont."

"But I'm tellin' you Lamont's layin' up there where I shot him," insisted blond Gus Anderson, still having trouble with his tongue. "That quartz—'

"What's this about Luke Lamont?" Al Jones, doctor and coroner, breezed in, rubbing his long-fingered hands briskly. He had a long-boned, solemn face with deepset eyes. His voice and manner proved he was capable of either keeping his fellow townsmen alive or burying them properly.

"I had good reason to shoot down the son!" boomed out Abe Roth.

"That how you got your nose busted?" probed Al Jones.

"Nope! That damn' Kale Carson done it accidental when I slipped. Carson's boastin' he killed Lamont. I've got the empty shell to prove I done it!"

"They're both lyin' blaggards!" shouted Jim Pearson. "It's 'cause I'm small size an' one-handed! If it's meanin' the hangrope, I shot Lamont, an' them two big rannies didn't know nothin' about it until they come onto the corpse!"

Al Jones's eyes appeared to sink deeper into his skull. He bolstered up Gus Anderson who staggered against him.

"It was me, too, drilled the polecat when I run onto 'im followin' Dave to git that quartz—"

When the slow-voiced Dave finally broke in, Al Jones nodded. Of the lot of them, it was dead sure Dave Carr wouldn't lie.

"It makes a fella feel downright good inside, Doc Jones, to be havin' friends that are willin' to lie themselves into a killing they didn't do," came Dave's slow, measured words. "It ain't me so much as Mary they're thinkin' on, an' maybe hopin' they can make it come out like I didn't shoot her—well—her foster father."

Al Jones's deep eyes held a sudden twinkle.

"Don't run off too much at the mouth, Dave, until we've had a look-see at the corpse everybody's clamorin' to prove died under his bullets," said Al Jones, who maybe was smiling some over his double chore of being coroner and undertaker. "Ain't heard ary fuss down the street. On our way, supposin' every son buttons his tongue. Like as not there's a heap of other folks might suddenly hone to wear the killer brand."

"But it's only rightful—" began Dave.

"Cain't be takin' no evidence without seein' the corper delicter, Dave. Let's nosey along."

CONTRARY to Doc Jones's order, the several would-be prideful killers came along, muttering and grumbling. Promiscuous shooting in Tonto Basin was too common to have drawn attention.

Walking beside Doc Jones, Dave almost touched his arm, but refrained when he saw a shadowy figure dart from the vicinity of the lane by the saddle shop and vanish near the creek. Dave knew he had shot Luke Lamont and he didn't want any more candidates for hired gunslick lead, a stretch in the Salt Lake pen or maybe glory, depending upon what Tonto Basin finally decided.

"Y'see, like I said, Lamont's gun's right there by his hand, provin' he had drawed when I up an' plugged him!" boomed Abe Roth.

"I'd have the marshal lock you in the hoosegow, Abe," snapped Doc Jones. "If we had a marshal and a hoosegow. Now shut up."

To Dave Carr all this was now a waste of time. He clenched his teeth as Doc Jones flipped open Lamont's six and smelled of the muzzle.

"S'pose on closer inspection, it'll turn out the trigger was jammed," stated Doc Jones, pocketing the gun. "Let's get on with probin' and determinin' the cause why Luke Lamont is a corpse."

Dave again saw the furtive, shadowy figure under the aspen trees nigh the creek he had brought back

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Coyote Brother

by Mat Rand

(Author of "Lone Wolf Foreman")

Bart Anson didn't aim to kill his double-crossing brother, but he did plan to make him somewhat uncomfortable!

CALL IT HIS ironical sense of humor, his long-frozen boyish outlook upon life, or the puckish deviltry with which he had been born, but Bart Anson hadn't the faintest notion of killing his brother Roth. Six years of unmerited hell in the Deer Lodge pen would have brought most men to coldly reasoned belief that only death could avenge the treachery of Roth Anson.

Six years had changed Bart Anson physically. He had been pared down from the rounded chubbiness of a wild, fun-seeking younker of twenty to the lean, rawhide toughness in body of a fast-moving mountain cougar. Of medium height and weight, Bart had the hard, fighting strength of others twice his size.

"I was framed, sure," Bart would say once in awhile to a prison pal. "But ain't that what we all say," he'd nearly always add without a trace of bitterness. "I was found drunk and asleep beside a wrongful branded calf that was still tied an' choked to death by the noose on its neck."

In six years he'd not mentioned his brother having sworn him into this sweating hell. Saying that he had known their calf crop was growing too fast. That Bart had pushed his own tally, and he hadn't seen Bart for two days before he was picked up by riders from the neighboring outfit which ran only Herefords.

The freshly branded dead calf had been a Hereford; the Ansons ran only Durhams. When he reached that point, Bart would mention he'd been playing poker and drinking with another fellow after that only a few hours before he'd been picked up. He didn't add either that the calf beside which he was found had been dead since some time the day before. He had been drinking with his brother Roth after midnight of the morning he was nabbed.

BART ANSON was riding a droopy chestnut jughead down through Horned Owl pass. He could see the circling rim on the other side of Hawk River Valley. The sun was down to where it would bring on the hour-long mountain dusk over the broadest range of blue grass in Montana, on in any other state of the middle Rockies.

Not once at Deer Lodge or to a friend since had he named the Pothook spread, or the Arrow iron that joined up with it. Bart had none of the pallor of an ex-con. Where his face hadn't a heavy beard, it was burned the color of tanned leather. It had been two years since he had been given his full freedom and Bart was now twenty-eight.

Bart reined up when the twenty-mile stretch of Hawk River Valley came into view. He talked low and softly to the worn jughead.

"Le'see, it's eight years come next week since I went away. That makes Roth thirty-one. He could-a hitched up with Hannah, it was all set, an' that makin' him the son-by-law of Buck Sanford an' Hannah the only one to heir the Arrow, there wasn't no sense in him brush-brandin' them Herefords."

At his trial, eight years before, Bart Anson wouldn't plead one way or another. Said he'd been too groggy to know what was going on that night. He could have told of drinking with

This Car'line girl could handle a gun!

his brother Roth, but Hannah Sanford sat with Roth at the trial.

* * *

HANNAH wasn't a pretty girl. Her features were plain and her mouth too straight, but Bart could tell the way Hannah's eyes followed Roth, she'd go to hell in a hand basket for him. So Bart kept his tongue tightly looped, sort of figuring Roth would get him out of a prison

stretch. Bart had been itchy-footed anyway, wanting to take a pasear around the states before settling down on the Pothook, half of which he had heired.

Roth Anson had not said the word. Being too young and prideful, Bart had never once written a line to Roth or any other of the Hawk River Valley folks. He couldn't see then how he could be one of the valley people after this, and did make that long waited pasear, taking to rodeo riding and fancy shooting.

He got off the tired cayuse, slipped the bridle and let the beast graze. He flipped out his special rodeo iron, a .38 made accurate on a .45 frame. So far as his intentions toward Roth were concerned, the gun had no part.

"Damfunny!" he said, taking a newspaper clipping from his leather wallet. "I reckon old Buck Sanford reared up an' kept Hannah from hitchin' up with Roth on account of me."

The clipping was one of several. This one mentioned *Miss* Hannah Sanford teaching the valley school. Others spoke of the Pothook outgrowing all other irons in the valley, one about his brother Roth being the first to prove Angus cattle beat Herefords in market beef.

As he read, Bart Anson's dark brown eyes held the boyish deviltry that was more like anticipation of a coming joke than any brooding over what Roth Anson's dirty doublecross had cost him. As he stretched out for a rest, he was lean-flanked and square of shoulder. His nose was so blunt it was almost stubby. His chin would have been rounded except for a deep riding scar that broadened it.

Bart's thick beard covered this, but he brought it to view when he shaved at a spring pool for the first time in weeks. He pulled his Stetson low over stubby, black hair and looked at his reflection in the spring pool.

"It'll do where it ain't too light," he said. "Wisht he hadn't took to fancy duds, but maybe so the Pothook bein' named as kingpinnin' it over the valley has gone to Roth's head."

A FEW MINUTES later Bart Anson had shucked his trail duds for tight riding pants that itched his legs, a new checkered shirt and a jacket, and had pushed his feet into soft boots. His old duds went back into his saddle roll, and he cached this in the bushes.

Bart had been keeping an eye upon the nighest Pothook pasture and he chuckled when he saw that a spare string of the Anson buckskin ropers had been turned out to graze. The sun was not at the rim across the valley and he waited.

He read a clipping again. All had come from the weekly newspaper published in the county seat town of Hawksville. These papers had been going to him, under another name, for two years.

Amply changed by leaner weight, age and his beard, Bart had been around Hawksville for two weeks, seeing his brother Roth three times, thus getting a line on his riding garb. Not at any time had the killing of his brother entered his mind.

The Hawksville news item that had both determined him to even his own score with his coyoting brother and at the same time perhaps do an unsuspecting girl an offhand favor was a blunt editorial, probably written by an editor mad at the world.

It was like this....

The John Satterly nester farm is growing in size, although the owner of the Pothook grazing range has been declaring the legally bounded plowpusher pocket cutting a chunk from his spread on the Hawk River will be destroyed. The Pothook owner has been riding out with the pretty niece of John Satterly during the past few months. Could it be this has anything to do with the nester getting title to a big, new plot of corn acreage?

Bart Anson had tried to forget any notion of striking back at his doublecrossing brother. As often happens, born of the same blood, as of today looking much like each other, Bart and Roth Ansoin followed sharply diverging trails in thinking and character.

Yes, Bart Anson had been some wild. That was all. He had put faith in his brother and it had failed. He knew that Roth believed he never would return to Hawk River Valley. Bart recollected sharp verbal battles between Roth and Satterly, and threats of gunplay that never materialized. But for this news clipping Bart might have forgotten it, not come back to the valley.

But Bart was remembering how the eyes of Hannah Sanford had followed Roth the day he was sentenced to Deer Lodge.

IT WAS DEEPENING, purple dusk across the valley when Bart roped and saddled a buckskin with the Pothook brand. He headed downriver to what had been the holding meadow for yearling feeders.

Of such was the spirit of Bart Anson that he almost forgot the vengeful chore he had been eight years pondering when he saw feeding trout swirling below the riffles of Hawk River.

"Dangit, if I had me some black gnat flies an' a fly rod to go with 'em, I could snag me a couple o' big ones an' fry 'em at my night fire," complained Bart.

He cussed some then as he hazed a bunch of yearlings toward where the fast ripening corn of the John Satterly place bordered the river trail. There was late twilight quiet along the river, broken only by the piping and croaking of frogs, until the steers set up a bawling at the smell of the fresh, green corn.

Bart moved quietly then, hoping the bawling would not stir up any of the Satterlys. He snipped out a panel of barbed wire with the cutters he had brought along. Swinging back to the saddle of the buckskin, Bart had no trouble rounding the steers into the growing corn.

The green corn was saddle-high and Bart rode in. He had it in mind that he must be seen briefly by some of the Satterlys and mistaken for his brother Roth. After that, well, he'd high tail it for the camping spot where he had rope staked his chestnut.

Bart was well inside the Satterly corn plot when he heard a shrill, boyish yell of anger.

"Why, yuh guddem fence buster! Mister Biggety, his own self, what's been makin' a plumb fool outta Cousin Car'line! I seen yuh snip that wire, Roth Anson!"

Bart reined up fast. He had ridden into a space of short corn. The voice of the defender of the Satterly plow crop and Cousin Car'line was a carrot top of not more than ten or so. Bart's memory of the Satterly family tree included one redhead baby of three nester kids eight years ago.

Bart chuckled. The bunch of yearlings was scattered through the corn. The carrot top would sure enough spring the trap baited for Roth Anson. Old John Satterly, Bart recollected, once had stung the hides of his brother and a Pothole rider with salt from a shotgun when they had busted his fence, built of rails.

Bart was pivoting the buckskin to hit out.

YELLING again, the Satterly carrot top cut loose with a gun. cracking like a .25-30. a small but deadly rifle at short range. The redheaded kid was fast and he triggered three times.

"Wouldn't you damn well know it!" groaned Bart as the first shot hit his right elbow, slicing into the upper arm.

His agonized exclamation came as he was falling from the saddle of the whirling buckskin. The lead jolting the elbow bone jerked his hand from the roper's rein and knocked him down into the corn as effectively as if the bullet had clipped his skull.

Bart was catlike in landing and coming to his feet. But the buckskin, carrying his saddle, was bolting away, evidently having been nipped by lead.

"I'll learn yuh, Mister Biggety!" Carrot top was still yelling and shooting. "Cuttin' fence an' havin' our corn tromped on account o' Cousin Car'line heered about Schoolma'am Hannah an' give yuh yore uppance!"

The highly vocal Satterly was screaming shrilly, running and still shooting. Bart's right arm was more numbed than painful at the moment

and a hard grin crossed his broad, firm mouth.

"Seems how I went to a helluva lot o' trouble for nothin'," grunted Bart. "But leastwise it'll not do Roth any good. Now I gotta shag out o' this corn patch without bein' caught up."

He could tell that the carrot top was chasing the bolting Pothook roping horse. He saw now that the Satterly redhead with the rifle couldn't see that he had made a bulls-eye, knocking him from the saddle with his first bullet.

It was rapidly growing dark and Bart cussed to himself as he thought of his lost riding gear and the distance he'd have to shag back to his warbag where he had staked out the chestnut.

"Damn' lucky I was carryin' my dinero in my belt, thinkin' of payin' off the Satterlys afterward for the corn being glutted by Roth's Pothook yearlings," muttered Bart, moving slowly through corn that was above head high.

Suddenly Bart became aware that blood was soaking his shirt and other duds from the busted arm. He had been holding the lead-torn elbow across his middle with his left hand. The voice of the shooting carrot top was fading out.

More than that. Bart was becoming dizzy and weaker. Then he seemed to have lost his sense of direction. He heard other voices just as he checked his wound with the fumbling fingers of his left hand. All at once he was gripping the upper arm above the bullet rip.

"Drilled an artery, an' how the blue hell am I gonna cut off that pumpin'? Can't get the damn' gun belt off and I can't so much as knot a neckerchief with my left hand. Be one on me if I hafta holler for help—"

He tried to twist the red neckerchief that went with his own duplication of his brother Roth's fancy duds. He couldn't tie a knot with his left hand and his arm dropped weakly. He slumped.

Bart got to his knees, then to his feet, but after two steps he fell flat. The sudden night around him was more in his fading eyes than the result of full sundown.

Bart gave up trying then. He had to call for help. Like as not old John Satterly would fill him full of shotgun salt first, and then ask questions. The Pothook yearlings were gorging themselves on the green corn. Bart wished the carrot top had started saving the corn instead of chasing an imaginary Roth Anson on a runaway buckskin.

Bart didn't want to be responsible for the Pothook yearlings floundering in the corn.

BART ANSON didn't know why he should worry about the stock of the ranch that by this time Roth must believe was all his own. He was growing weaker and sicker and he judged he'd have to risk the wrath of John Satterly.

Bart thought he was shouting for help. His whisper couldn't have reached beyond two corn rows. But murmuring voices came closer and Bart believed he had been heard.

The light from a coal oil lantern suddenly sprayed over him. At the same time he heard a girl's clear voice cry out. It was a wonderfully clear contralto, better than that of the rodeo singer Bart would have tried romancing with, only Bart never forgot that he was an ex-con. He couldn't have asked her to marry him.

Bart didn't realize how much strength had been drained from his veins until he had tried lifting his head and fixing his eyes upon the owner of the voice. The meaning of her words didn't register upon Bart's senses right away.

"Don't shoot, Uncle John! Put down that awful scatter-gun I don't care if I did find him out, or about the busting of your fence! Can't you see he's badly hurt, he's—"

"Git away Car'line!" Bart had no trouble identifying John Satterly's voice, for Satterly had the biggest nose ever seen on Hawk River and he seemed to talk through it. "Ary low-lifted snake what'd ruinate a man's first corn crop in five years tryin' is gittin' his hide plastered with salt. He ain't got nothin' but

one o' Billy's rabbit huntin' bullets in his arm, an' him bein' the owner o' the gunnie ridden Pothook, Sheriff Harris wouldn't darst say nothin' about a fence bein' busted. He gits what's due here *now!*"

Bart's eyes had a wavering focus upon Satterly's big nose that appeared to overhang a small, stubborn mouth. The shotgun he had first seen years before was steadied upon him and Satterly's cocking of the hammers of the old smooth bore clicked. At that distance the loads of coarse salt would tear much deeper than under the outside hide.

Bart guessed he'd lost so much blood he didn't care. The pale blue eyes of Satterly were shining with vicious intentness against the light of the bright-flamed lantern held by the girl whose own face was completely shadowed.

The thunder of the old shotgun would have shaken the dead in the graves of Hawk River's boothill, where many wild ones had been planted in the first days of the rich valley. Bart couldn't hear the splintering crash of glass upon metal that must have been but a split second before Satterly pulled the trigger in his almost insane anger over having a corn crop destroyed.

Dirt from the corn row slapped Bart's face, but whether he had been salted for keeps or was fast bleeding to death, Bart couldn't judge. He imagined then his own vision had quit. All in all, this was one heller of a joke he had started out to put upon his brother Roth.

There had been a flash of exploding oil, a brief flare in the corn row, and then John Satterly was trumpeting like a mad elephant through his overhanging proboscis.

"Gol dang yuh fer a chicken-brained fool, Car'line! You've went an' busted a twelve dollar lantern to smithereens, an' like as not jimmed up the triggers o' my shotgun, besides scorchin' the hide off my hand with that burnin' oil!"

Another woman's voice, but this was as raspy as file, broke in then. Bart didn't have to be told it was angular Mrs. Satterly talking.

"Car'line had oughta busted that lantern over your thick head, John Satterly! You ain't got the sense the Lord gave geese! I seen you shootin' an' while I don't hold no truck with Roth Anson, he was down an' maybe bleedin' to death! Hand Car'line your gun, an' git hold o' Anson's shoulders! Where'd me an' all the kids be if you got hung for murder! I'll take the feet an' we'll git him to the house!"

"Wait, Aunt Martha," came the girl's voice. "Hurry with another lantern. I'll have to put a tourniquet about that bullet tear. I saw an artery had been cut just before I smashed out the light. Uncle John, I have to use your galluses, and twist them tight with his gun barrel."

As nearly out as he was, Bart was quick to recognize the Eastern lingo and the competence of the girl. He was too nearly gone to figure her for a nurse or just a level-headed angel who knew the only possible chance to save his life.

Satterly's swearing, the girl's quick, deft touch in handling his lead busted elbow and almost everything else had faded out. He didn't know when he was toted to the Satterly house, but liquid fire choked him then revived him.

From items in the Hawksville weekly, Bart Anson had known, without much interest, that the nesters were yearly baby croppers and he would have expected to find more kids than comfort in the plow pusher's home. Yet he awoke to as neatly a fitted and brightly a painted room as was to be found in the house of the rich Pothook spread.

Through a partly opened door he could see another room where a well set supper table for a big family proved that someone in the household was well fitted to the chore of bringing up younkers. The dining room held new furniture and its walls were papered in a cheerful green. All had the touch of a newcomer's hand.

But Bart Anson hadn't time to dwell upon this incongruity of the home of nasal-voiced John Satterly. He had the quick notion he had been out longer than it seemed, and this might be some other home.

Then he discovered that his lead-busted arm was expertly bandaged, a tourniquet so tightly twisted that his hand was dead. There should have been pain now above the bandage, but Bart had a sort of sleepy, go-to-hell feeling all over.

THE GIRL stood beside him with a glass from which she had given him brandy. He hadn't been seeing clearly out in the corn row when a smashed lantern saved him from getting a hideful of salt.

"You the Cousin Car'line that little redheaded bushwacker said had given me my come uppance, when he mistook me for Roth Anson?" Bart was surprised that his voice was weak.

She was a tall, strong girl. Her nose was straight and she smiled with her probing gray eyes rather than her mouth, which had a firm offhand that she was a pretty girl, but he thought "the hell I wouldn't" as soon as he had her coiled yellow-golden hair in the lamplight and got her clear low voice.

"Billy had every right to shoot you," she parried. "Except for your scarred chin and your special killer's gun, I'd maybe have mistaken you for your brother Roth. Now you'll not talk until Aunt Martha can get back from Hawksville with Dr. Ramer to find out if he can fix up your cracked elbow so your gunhand can still be as deadly as that thirty-eight on a forty-five is sighted to be."

"You know a hell—a heap about guns for a gal with your nice, Eastern lingo," got out Bart, not overlooking how well put together she was for a big girl. "My talkin' can't make any difference, 'cause the way I feel I ain' got enough blood left to think I'll live. Never had a notion a fella would be so peaceful in dyin'."

Her gray eyes didn't smile now as she studied him. For all of his weakness and in the face of being in a tight that could send him back to Deer Lodge, Bart spoke with quizzical, fearless humor.

"Seeing you came out of a coma in ten minutes, you'll likely not die," the girl said sharply. "I'm a nurse and you had a shot that gives you that idea dyin's easy. It's too bad that men who have been cut down by file-triggered guns don't find passing out to be fun."

"Whoa up, Car'line," managed Bart huskily. "You've called it, an' you knowin' I'm an ex-con makes me a killer, huh? All that .38 ever killed was lights on cigarets at thirty feet, an' flyin' glass balls."

This might have gone on to an understanding, but suddenly a bright glare came into the windows of the room. Bart tried to get up, but couldn't Car'line hurried to a window.

"It's the haystacks in the Pothook river meadow!" she exclaimed. "I hope little Billy—" she turned about, facing Bart, and her voice was icy. "See what your idea of getting your brother Roth killed by cutting fence and ruining Uncle John's corn has caused."

Bart was still sleepy from a drug, but he fought it off.

"Dally it, Car'line, right there," he said. "Maybe Roth would think that way, but right off, get this straight. I had an idea of doin' somebody a favor—but—"

Bart clamped his teeth shut. He'd lived eight years without letting out a squawk, and he wasn't changing on account of the finest girl he had ever met up with. Dammit! He was still an ex-con and he should have stayed away from the Hawk River valley.

Car'line said, "This'll maybe bring on a shooting feud. Isn't there some kind of long powder fuse that could be planted in dry hay, Mister—"

"Make it Bart or maybe Number nine-thousand-and-nine," said Bart quickly. "Yup, Car'line. There ain't ary doubt but what I coulda planted such long fuses. Maybe instead of having a killer's soul I've got a dang-whanged twisted sense of humor."

Car'line glanced out at the other room.

"Uncle John and the kids were chasing the Pothook steers out of the corn," she said. "Billy's redheaded and thinks that way. Anyway, I hope Doc Ramer gets here in time to save your arm."

BART'S special .38 was lying on the table beside his bed. Car'line scooped it up and stuck it under her white waist. .

"Anybody in partic'lar you're thinkin' of salivatin'?" asked Bart with a twisted grin. "That gun ain't made for foolin'."

Before Car'line could reply there was a thumping of feet into the rear of the house. Bart heard the voice of his brother Roth for the first time in eight years.

"We'll hafta scour the hills for Bart, an' he's a dead shot, Harris," Roth Anson was saying. "Lucky I come ridin' along on the roan, just after Billy Satterly saw that damn' ex-con cut the corn field fence and high tail it up toward the meadow hay-stacks, then come onto me on the roan. My buckskin, with Bart's saddle on him, busted a leg in a gopher hole and my convict brother had to shag it away after firin' the stacks. But he won't make it far, Harris."

"Damn' right he won't!" came from the lawman. "An' hearin' he's been makin' a gunsmoke rep after gettin' out of Deer Lodge, he'll come in either to go back to the pen or help fill out a patch in our boothill."

BART SAW Car'line's fine, tall figure halt inside the door of his room.

"That lets little Billy out of it," she said in a low tone. "Sheriff Harris happened to be riding this way, but that's not strange, seeing he's been sparking Hannah Sanford for some time."

Bart tried a low whistle but his lips were too lax to pucker. He murmured so only Car'line could hear.

"This man is a dangerous killer. He's worth as much dead as he is alive. That's how the reward notice will read."

Bart guessed that Satterly and his small tribe were still hazing stray Pothook steers from the corn. His whole notion had been loco from the beginning.

He had intended putting his brother on the wrong end of a new feud with the Satterly tribe. He'd imagined he might save a girl he didn't know from Adam's off ox from the perfidy of a brother who had tossed plain Hannah Sanford over after it seemed he no longer needed the Arrow spread to add to the power of the Pothook.

And like the dumb, fun-loving ranny he was, Bart could see himself headed back to Deer Lodge, maybe for a hundred years to life. Being caught cutting fence was enough to tighten a loop on an ex-con.

"Then by hell!" muttered Bart. "That carrot topped Satterly button has to knock me cold, an' chase that Pothook buckskin until he runs into Roth himself. Which gives that slick-minded rooster the notion that by burnin' his own haystacks, killin' a buckskin wearin' my saddle rig, he puts onto me what's always been hang-rope medicine in Hawk River country, not countin' me bein' a jailbird with a calf stealin' rep."

Bart wasn't too dumbheaded to know he still could claim half the Pothook, of which he hadn't wanted any part with his scheming brother Roth. The Hawk River valley was past the history of trail-side hangings for rustling, but the regular law now put arson in the same bracket with murder.

THE amazingly competent Cousin Car'line glanced at Bart, then eased from view into the dining room. For a minute Bart was thinking that his being shot, with John Satterly knowing he hadn't ridden off the place would put a crimp in brother Roth's slick scheme.

Then all of a sudden he realized that Satterly and all of his various progeny must still be trying to chase Pothook steers through the cut fence. For Bart heard but two voices he could identify.

Sheriff Harris's voice was a picture of the lawman himself, as Bart remembered him. He was a squat, paunchy man, with a trap-like harsh mouth under a ragged red mustache. Bart recalled the lawman as having but one loyalty, a political payoff devotion to the top dogs of the range or town, and to hell with how they acquired the mazuma. His services were for sale to the crookedest tin-

horn or the rancher who swung his loop wide enough to contribute to the sheriff's continuous campaign fund.

"If your jailbird brother's held up here, as yuh got an idear he might be, that smart Car'line Martin, Mrs. Satterly's niece, is knowin' it, if she ain't with them as is hazin' yore yearlin's to save that corn crop," spilled out Sheriff Harris. "She's the kind o' woman critter to look out for sharp. It was smart washin' that blood off Bart's ridin' gear. If we run onto him—"

"Him burnin' them stacks!" cut in Roth Anson's smoother voice. "Maybeso a court might hold he still was part owner o' the Pothook, an' there's been a heap o' talkin' about the way I'm roddin' the Pothook that'd make it hard to get the right kind of a jury. But with Bart resistin' the law, it'd be plain reason for a lawful gun-smokin'!"

Two other guttural voices, evidently emanating from a pair of Pothook gunhands, cussed in agreement. Bart thought Car'line might have run out to call the Satterlys. He heard his brother and the others enter the dining room.

"That Eastern gal has sure 'nough made this Satterly place fitten for a family," came Sheriff Harris's growl. "She'd o' made yuh the kind o' missus that'd smoothed over them that's got notions the Pothook's fixin' to grab off the Arrow an' some other spreads by yore Hawk River dam idea!"

"Yeah, maybe," Bart heard Roth grunt. "Only she's too damn' smart too many ways!"

AT LEAST four men were coming through the dining room. Bart had realized only in the last few seconds that his own mild idea of a payoff for his brother's double-cross eight years before had put him right between that well known hell and the deep blue.

With a supreme effort he rolled from the bed. He was still clothed except for his shirt where his arm was bandaged. Two windows opened into the darkness outside.

Under the pain-killing drug, Bart moved more slowly than he thought. He was, however, trying to drag himself over the windowsill at breast level with his numbed but unwounded arm when he heard his brother Roth curse loudly.

"There he goes! Smoke down the damn' stack burnin' jailbird!"

A six-gun was like thunder in the small room. A jolt upon Bart's already wounded arm spun him half around. He had a glimpse of his brother's rage-distorted face, lean like his own, but with hell in his eyes where Bart nearly always had only humor.

Bart saw Sheriff Harris raising his bone-handled six for a certain shot. Again the room echoed with gun thunder, but in it this time was the staccatto cracking that Bart knew so well. That would be his .38 on the .45, a target gun but deadly.

Roth Anson cursed and his oath merged with a groan. Bart saw his brother's .45 fall from his right hand, and Roth's left hand clutched at a shattered elbow.

Car'line had come from the other room with the speed of a shadow. Sheriff Harris bellowed.

"Drop that gun! Yuh ain't no better'n ary other hussy resistin' the law!"

Bart held to the windowsill. The tall Car'line was in front of Sheriff Harris with a gliding movement as he was about to trigger pointblank at Bart.

The lawman's six-gun exploded, but it lead gouged the ceiling. The crackling .38 in the hand of Car'line had removed part of the wildly swearing lawman's trigger finger inside the guard.

Bart could have sworn there was a smile in Car'line's wide gray eyes, but her wide, firm lips clipped out her words.

"I could've lawfully drilled your crooked brain dead center, Mister Sheriff," came her low, clear voice. "Like this."

The short butt of a dead stogie stuck from one corner of the lawman's mouth under his ragged, red mos-

tache. Car'line's third bullet clipped off the stogie so close it cut hair from the drooping mustache.

Two Pothook gunhands had started to drag their irons, but they changed their minds when Roth Anson and the cursing Sheriff Harris started backing from the room.

"I'll have yuh sent up—"

Car'line's clear voice sliced off the beginning of the sheriff's threat.

"Back where I come from you'd have your star taken off for invading a private home without a warrant, Mister Sheriff. I've an idea that Hawksville has had enough of that tin badge. Take it off and drop it or do I clip it off from your vest,"

Nursing a ripped trigger finger, Sheriff Harris got off his badge hastily with his left hand. Roth's hired hands backed out.

"I'll see my jailbird brother sent back for life!", blustered Roth Anson, groaning over his broken elbow. "Him tryin' to frame me for fence bustin', and burnin' my hay!"

The big-nosed, whanging voice of John Satterly came from the dining room.

"Git movin' yuh double-crossin' scut, 'fore I salt the hides o' the whole passel o' yuh!" Satterly held his old scatter-gun. "Bustin' into a man's home an' felonerously tryin' to kill Bart Anson who was tryin' to help us git them damn' Pothook steers outta the corn where Roth Anson cut the fence!"

"Yeah! Git goin' like pa says, yuh guddem Mister Biggety!"

The Satterly carrot top was in the doorway with his rabbit rifle.

"I'm gonna whup the hell outta yuh, Billy, if yuh don't quit that damn' cussin', like yore Cousin Car'line's learnin' yuh ain't fitten," twanged out John Satterly as Roth Anson, Sheriff Harris and their gunhands disappeared.

BART WAS sitting with his back propped up against the wall under the window. Car'line said, "Uncle John, help Bart to the bed. He'll be staying until his elbow's mended and he takes over his rightful share of the Pothook, or all of it. When I tell Roth Anson what Schoolma'am Hannah Sanford talked about while she was out of her head after she tried to poison herself, I imagine Roth will be taking what you call a pasear to stay out of Deer Lodge."

Car'line was bandaging the fresh bullet gouge in Bart's right shoulder. She laid a cool hand on his forehead.

"Not a sign of fever," she announced.

"But there's sure as hell gonna be," said Bart with a slow grin. "That is, 'less you say you won't refuse to make the house on the Pothook what it should be."

Her gray eyes and her firm lips smiled together.

"I suppose it'll have to be that way, seeing I'll have to take over the gunsmoke for the family if you keep geting every stray bullet in your right arm," she said quietly. "You're guessing some about how I knew that special .38. I found out there was more pay in trick shooting with a rodeo than in nursing."

Bart closed his eyes. When he opened them she was still there. This had turned out to be the damnest joke. Now he was sure it was better this way than having had an urge to kill his brother.

What Roth thought was not made known. Roth was riding hell bent out of Hawk River valley, and he wasn't figuring on coming back.

THE END

Satan's Gunsmoke Messenger

By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.

(Author of "Misery Craves Company")

No matter where Dan Wickett went, the powdersmoke reputation he had somehow found him out!

DAN WICKETT, ex-cowman who had settled his arguments by guntalk, rode the afternoon stage to Denver, and his bad reputation, which tagged him like a devoted puppy wherever he went, sat on the floor at his feet, grinning up at him.

"Why," Dan Wickett asked the imp, his thin lips scarcely moving over his even teeth, "Why do you keep hounding me?"

Dan Wickett's bad rep just grinned at him mockingly. The stage rumbled on. Dan Wickett drew hard on his quirley, cursed. In the past year-and-a-half, he must have asked himself that question dozens of times, and always there was the same answer. You can't lick your past, especially if it is a decidedly unsavory one.

The three men swaying about on the seat opposite Dan were staring. At various times during the dusty trip, they had tried to draw Dan into active conversation, with discouraging results. Dan Wickett lately had developed a morose aloofness. The less you shot off your mouth to other men, the less they could find fault with you, he held.

"Hot," the heavy-jowled man with the gold watchchain on his fancy vest said.

"Hot," the gaunt, hollow-cheeked gent beside him agreed.

"Hot as hell," the short, pock-marked fellow by the window said.

Dan Wickett just nodded.

Dan had had enough of gabbing too much to strangers. The last place he worked....a cowhand on a two-bit spread in Wyoming....he had talked and the foreman had found out things. The foreman found out how Dan Wickett in bygone days had been a gun swift who eliminated gents who bucked him. He found out that Dan Wickett was wanted by the law for a certain killing, a man who had been discovered with a .45 slug in his back. He fired Dan Wickett without giving him a chance to explain.

Dan Wickett's bad rep imp on the floor in front of him grinned, and Dan nodded inwardly. There wasn't much use explaining that you didn't wear a gun now, didn't want to see the damn thing again. That the gents you eliminated, had drawn first, but that you drew so fast it looked as if they hadn't even drawn at all.

Or that the special killing, the slug-in-the-back one, had been a frameup, and that you weren't the one who had done the killing, but couldn't prove it.

Dan recalled his father's words the day the latter had ordered Dan out of the house. It was just after the terrible fight in which Chris Wickett had whaled the living daylights out of his full-grown son.

"Get out," the six-foot-five rancher had roared, "Get the hell out and don't come back until you've proved yourself a man. A gent who can look a real man in the face without shifting his eyes. A gent who can stand up against me, pin my ears back in an honest-to-Gawd fight. A gent who can settle his arguments without resorting to gunplay. A gent with hair on his chest. A man."

Chris Wickett was a man. He had enormous strength, which he never

Dan Wickett took hold of the thick spokes in his big hands. He spread his legs, back arched . . .

used unwisely. He could raise a full-grown steer and carry it on his shoulders for a half mile down the road. He could bend a branding iron into an arch. And up until the break with his son, Dan, he never had laid a heavy hand on him.

"That was my mistake," Chris Wickett had said bleakly. "I should of tanned yore hide till it bled, rather than let you fall into that lead-slinging habit of yours."

Chris Wickett always had a bitter hatred for gunmen and lawbreakers

in general. It cut him to the quick to see his son turn into one of that loathsome breed.

DAN HAD obeyed his father, after that awful licking. He had gathered up his plunder, ridden out of the state. The killing he got accused of, happened in a small town on the border. Dan rode away with a posse at his heels. He finally shook them, drifted on, ever on, taking any job he could land, as long as it was honest. And he threw away his gun. He hadn't fired a gun for the past eighteen months. He worked on ranches, in saloons, restaurants, mining camps, at anything available.

He paid particular attention to building up his slight body. He exercised, swam in creeks, rode jittery broncs. He practiced hefting weights, smaller ones at first, then gradually heavier ones. His body responded remarkably. His chest expanded, his muscles lost their flabbiness, acquired a wiry toughness. Dan got so he could tear up a stack of magazines, held together, in his big hands.

And all the time, that damnable, grinning bad reputation imp of Dan's sat around beside him and chuckled. He laughed like a fiend from hell every time Dan figured he had gotten in solid at a place, then lost the job when folks found out who he really was.

It was no use thinking you could lick a gun past. Nobody wanted any part of an ex-gunny, a gent with a shady rep. He might revert to that past and start gun-slinging at any time.

Even though he had sworn never to touch a gun again.

Dan Wickett scowled at the reputation imp, and shifted in his seat. He was fighting a losing battle, trying to land a permanent job, but damned if he'd ever give up.

The stage gave a sudden jerk, listed over to the right, stopped. Out in front, the driver's hoarse voice could be heard grinding out curses at the four-horse team. But the stage didn't budge.

The fat man with the gold watch-chain gunted. "Rut," he said. "Let's take a look."

He moved his big hulk out of the door, the other two men following. Dan Wickett stepped out, and his rep imp scampered after him.

The driver was staring down at the big wheel almost up to the hub in the hole in the road. He gave a futile shove on the rear part of the stage.

He looked up at the four passengers.

"Mebbe," he said dubiously, "the five of us and the hosses could move it. I'll whip up the broncs, get 'em strainin', then come back and help shove with the rest...."

The fat man and the hollow-cheeked gent were tugging at the wheel. The fat man shook his head. "Looks bad."

Dan Wickett tossed aside his smoke. "Let's see that wheel," he said.

He took hold of the thick spokes in his big hands. He spread his legs, back arched.

The little pock-marked man sneered. "Damn fool," he said. "Thinking he can..."

"For Gawd's sake!" The fat man's thick underlip sagged. "It's moving!"

SLOWLY. the big stagecoach straightened. Dan Wickett's bared arms were knotted, like bunches of hemp. The ex-gunman's face showed little of the strain the rest of his body was enduring. In fact, the man's whole appearance was one of a fellow lifting a bucket of water.

Dan Wickett calmly raised the stage clear of the hole, shoved the entire vehicle a foot or so beyond by merely turning the big wheel to the right.

"Reckon she's set," he told the staring driver.

The whiskered man with the whip licked his dry lips. "I'll be teetotally chawed up and spit out again!"

Dan Wickett unrolled his sleeves. He got into the stage first, the other three lingering on the dusty road.

Dan could hear what they were saying, faintly.

"Just the one we want. Strong as a bull," the little gent said excitedly.

"Hell, yes!" the gaunt fellow with the depressed cheeks said. "He'd stand a good chance to beat the pants off that..."

"Quiet!" said the fat man. "You talk too much, Tooker."

The rest of the trip to Denver was sweltering, dry, and uneventful. Dan Wickett got to wondering what this hard-looking trio had meant by "just the one we want". If they wanted something of him, they didn't say so to his face. Dan forgot about the incident as the stage rolled into the long main street of the town.

Dan Wickett spent the day looking for work. It seemed no one needed help at present. Dan was down to his last couple of bucks. When that was gone....Dan swallowed. He couldn't see that anyone here would know his past. There ought to be work of some kind, somewhere....

That night, he headed for the town's largest saloon. The place was ablaze with lights, music and woman's laughter and men's hoarse bawls drifting out. Dan Wickett placed his foot on the bottom step, and then the big sign on the blank wall nearby caught his eye.

"The Masked Maimer", the poster announced brazenly, "Five hundred dollars to the man who can throw him." There was more ballyhoo about the nature of the Masked Maimer's strength, his former conquests, and a final note in small print at the bottom which stated that his manager would not be responsible for any broken bones the Maimer's opponent might acquire.

Five hundred dollars...Dan Wickett's eyes gleamed, and he flexed his big, powerful arms. Here was something he could sink his teeth into. This Maimer duck probably was overrated, a gent with a fair build and an over-active press agent.

"The bigger they come..." Dan Wickett mused.

He didn't notice the approach of three men on the boardwalk. They were Prueman, Stacey, and Tooker, the trio who had ridden with Dan in the stage. Prueman, the fat man, tapped the ex-gunny on the shoulder.

"Nice evening, friend," he said to Dan. "I, uh, see you're interested in that announcement. Don't think you could throw the gent, do you?"

"He's a chunk of a man," Stacey, the hollow-faced, said, looking at the poster.

The pock-marked Tooker laughed. "Wrestlers aren't the setup a stage wheel is," he said.

Dan Wickett looked at them coldly. He just couldn't warm up to this hard-case trio.

"There's always a first slip," he said. "The Maimer won't go on winning forever."

He looked at them a moment in silence, then, "Reckon I'll give him a fling."

THE FAT man, Prueman, coughed. He reached in his pocket, drew out a wad of bills. He peeled off a generous portion, thrust it into Dan Wickett's hand. "Here's two-hundred-fifty. There'll be another two-fifty, after you do the job. Give him the details, Stacey."

"You," the gaunt Stacey explained to Dan, "are to break the Maimer's neck in that fight. Nobody'll know it's on purpose. Just kill the gent in a legal way. We..Prueman, Tooker, and me..got a grudge against the Maimer. He busted up a poker game he was playin' with us, ordered us out of town. We went out, but came back to-day because we got some other deals on the fire. With the Maimer removed, we'll be okay."

Tooker nodded.

"We know you'll do it, Dan Wickett. "We went," and he chuckled, "through your pockets when you snoozed some on that stage. We found some clippings about your past and they sure ain't complimentary. That gent who was slugged in the back, for instance...."

"Why, you lousy....!"

Dan Wickett's big hands reached for the three men, his breath sucking with a sharp whistle. The three men drew back instinctively.

Prueman clamped on his cigar. "All you got to do," he said softly, "is crack the Maimer's neck. Then you get the other two hundred fifty, and we keep your past a dark secret. Otherwise, we notify the authorities."

"Five hundred from us, five hundred for throwing the gent," Stacey

reminded. "It ain't a bad deal."

"We'll be in the audience, watching," Tooker promised. "G'night, pal."

The trio walked down the boardwalk, leaving Wickett with the bills in his hands.

The bills were quite wrinkled from the way Dan was squeezing them.

Dan Wickett could have broken *their* necks, had he so chosen. He should have wiped the road up with them, for even suggesting that he kill a man in a wrestling match. But Dan Wickett's bad reputation imp was thumbing its nose at him, taunting him to try and reject Prueman's proposal. The little fiend leered at Dan Wickett standing there in front of the saloon and staring down the street at the disappearing figures of the three men.

"You can't lick me," the imp asserted saucily. "You know you won't stand a chance in this berg if your past is aired. Win that fight and you're set. You can hang out your own sign as a top wrestler. You can make your pile, go back to your dad whenever that other killing clears up. Don't be a sissy. What's a gent croaking under your strangle hold to you? It will look like an accident. Nobody'll ever be wise."

Dan Wickett shoved past the imp without comment. He was in a bad tight and he knew it. He couldn't afford to have Prueman and his pals reveal his identity here in Denver. That would mean jail and the rope, unless Dan was proven innocent, and the way things stood at present there wasn't a chance of that.

DAN COULD amass a fortune through wrestling under an assumed name. Like Stacey had said, nobody would know he'd killed the Maimer on purpose. Things like that do happen, occasionally. Dan Wickett just didn't know his own strength.

The ex-gunman made for the old opera house where the poster said you were to sign up. Dan got himself billed as Joe Atlas, from California.

Dan's bout with the Maimer came off Wednesday night. The night was stormy, thundering and raining and sultry hot, but it didn't discourage the crowd. Miners, cowpokes from townsfolk poured into P. Q. Marigold's Opera House. They came in buggies, on horse, and afoot. Everyone seemed eager to see what kind of a gent had the nerve to face the Maimer, and how long he would last with the Maimer tossing him around.

The ring was a roped-off area on the large stage. There was plenty of light in the house, clusters of lamps about the stage and impending from the high ceiling, newly-installed lamps along the ornate walls and above the boxes. Dan Wickett, standing over in his corner while the little bald-headed gent gave him a rubdown, looked out over the sea of faces and scowled. There they were, Prueman and his two snake pals, sitting right down in front by the orchestra pit, just as they had promised. Prueman looked up at Dan and nodded pleasantly. Dan felt like jumping over the ropes and smashing the leering features.

Dan Wickett's bad rep imp stood over by the curtains, grinning. No one else saw him but Dan himself and the three men, Prueman, Stacey and Tooker.

A yell went up from the crowd and a tall man in a mask and trunks walked out on the stage. Dan Wickett stared. This was the Maimer, the man whose face no one ever saw, and it was pretty plain that he was all the poster had claimed. Dan Wickett seldom had seen such a build on a man. Unbelievably tall, with long, muscular arms and enormous shoulders tapering to narrow hips and firm, well-shaped legs. No pushover, Dan decided. He'd have to be on his toes every minute.

"The Maimer!" the fat announcer shrilled, and his voice was drowned in the roar of the crowd.

The bell went off ten minutes later. Dan Wickett and the Maimer moved toward each other, circling warily. Dan, a rank novice at the wrestling game, didn't know what play would be best to try first, but he didn't hold a board meeting deciding. He

rushed the giant, making as if to reach for the other's head, then suddenly diving for the long hairy legs

The Maimer fell backward with a crash that made the floor quiver. Dan Wickett released the legs and pounced for the enormous shoulders.

The crowd screamed.

Dan Wickett stared stupidly at the spot where the Maimer had been. With catlike agility, the big man had squirmed to one side, rolling beyond Dan's reach.

Dan felt himself rushing through the air, to strike the floor with a sickening thud. The crowd, the lights, the walls whirled to Dan's spinning gaze.

Somehow, he managed to struggle to his feet.

"Had enough, sonny?" the Maimer said in a rough voice.

Dan could hear the crowd yelling and he moved forward. He found himself experiencing a grudging admiration for this big gent who could toss a powerful hulk like himself, Dan Wickett, around. Dan then and there forgot his promise to Prueman, Stacey, and Tooke. He forgot the money they had given him and the added amount they would give him to kill the Marimer for them.

"Let's go, mister," he called to the other eagerly.

THE MAIMER and Dan Wickett locked, went down on the floor, twisting. Dan tried a quick scissors old, but the giant batted him off. The Maimer grabbed Dan's right wrist like a vise. Dan tried to beak the grip, failed. He felt himself slowly being forced across the Maimer's knee to the floor. Dan's broad shoulders neared the wood. Dan's face purpled from strain. His muscles swelled, he put all he had into striving to free that right arm. He might as well have tried to move a ganite cliff.

Dan's shoulders came to within an inch of the floor.

"You ought to take up knitting," the Maimer grinned down at him.

That did it. Dan Wickett never was a good one to swallow ribbing.

(Continued On Page 102)

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(Continued From Page 101)

Dan's right knee came up, rodded into the Maimer's stomach. Dan shoved, and he put all his strength into that shove. The Maimer gave a grunt, doubled up cursing.

He let go of Dan Wickett's right wrist.

Dan had him then. With the roar of the crowd in his ears, the ex-gunman reached out and picked the gaint Maimer up. He raised the Maimer clear of the floor, kept on raising him. Up the enormous man-hulk went, until he was above Dan Wickett's head. Dan held him there at arms' length.

Then he started whirling.

The pair blurred like a spinning top. When they finally stopped, Dan dropped the Maimer by his feet, bouncd the latter upside down on the floor. The Maimer's head thumped on the wooden stage.

Dan Wickett let the body fall free. He then calmly sat astride the heaving chest, pinned the huge shoulders down on the floor.

The referee began to count. "One! Two! Three! Four!...."

He reached the fatal "ten".

The opera house rocked with yells. Grinning, Dan Wickett went over to the prostrate Maimer and helped him to his feet. The giant wrestler was breathing heavily. Dan Wickett held out his hand.

"You put up a swell fight, pardner," he said. "Almost had me for a...."

The Maimer was staring past Dan out into the crowd. Dan whirled and what he saw made him sick inside. Prueman and his cronies, up to now forgotten by Dan, were mounting the stage steps and coming over to the ring. Prueman had his hand on the gun on his hip, and the fat man's face was livid.

"Hold it! Hold it!" Prueman roared above the noise of the crowd. "Hold everything, you damn fools, while I let you in on some dirt. This Atlas duck here ain't what he seems. He's a...."

It was then the Maimer acted. His right mitt shot out, closed about Prueman's throat, throttling off the latter's speech in th middle. Prueman's gun exploded. The bullet went wildly toward the high ceiling.

SATAN'S GUNSMOKE MESSENGER

(Continued From Page 108)

The next moment, Prueman fell in a limp heap, his face smashed by the Maimer's iron fist.

Stacey fired at Dan Wickett and Dan felt the wind of the passing slug. Dan hurled himself for Stacey's legs and caught them. He whirled the lean man around like a pinwheel, let fly at the oncoming Tooker.

The two men met head on. They were out cold when they dropped floorward.

THE MAIMER pro offered his hand to Dan. "We were about to shake, before these monkeys butted in. Kid, I reckon I'm lookin' at a real man now, thank Gawd."

The man's tones made Dan look up. The Maimer removed his mask. Dan Wickett stared, and his voice choked up within his throat.

"Dad!" the ex-gunman said hoarsely.

It couldn't be. It must be a nightmare, dreamed up by Dan himself from his recent dizzy struggle. But it was the face of his father, good old Chris Wickett, all right, smiling at him from the body of the Maimer.

"I been trailing you for months, son," the big man was explaining. "Picking up odd wrestlin' jobs to finance things. Been tryin' to reach you to let you know that that killin' charge against you has been cleared It was one of the old Claxton gang who did the murder, and framed you almost so it stuck. Free? I'll tell the cockeyed world you're free, kid. You couldn't land in jail now if you wanted to. Sheriff Gleason told me he always did like yuh, would do everything he could to rub out that bad past of yourn."

Chris Wickett went on to tell how he had toured the range back home, had long talks with various cowmen, and that quite a few agreed that Dan deserved a chance to shake his past.

"You sure pinned my ears," Chris Wickett said, chuckling. "My head thumps and I ain't got my breath back yet."

Dan Wickett looked over at the curtains, and his bad reputation imp was shirttailing it back into the shadows. Dan had a feeling it was the last he'd seen of the little devil.

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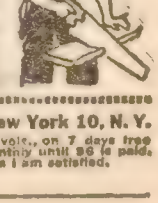

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Johnny tried again. The engineer snarled: "I heard you the first time, you little shrimp!"

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The engineer paused, glaring. Thinking he was reaching for a gun, Johnny shot him, but when Constable George McKelvey discovered that Schneider's hand enclosed only an unopened pen knife, he placed the unpopular gambler under arrest.

The mill whistle across the San Pedro wailed in alarm and men began to emerge from the buildings. Johnny was boosted up behind McCann and the filly streaked out towards town with her double burden. News of the murder had preceeded them by telegraph and whistles there began to scream just as McCann rode up to the Oriental saloon where Earp was dealing faro.

Seizing a double-barreled shotgun the marshal escorted his prisoner to a bowling alley and grimly faced the mob.

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"In there," he said tersely, his

(Continued on Page 106)

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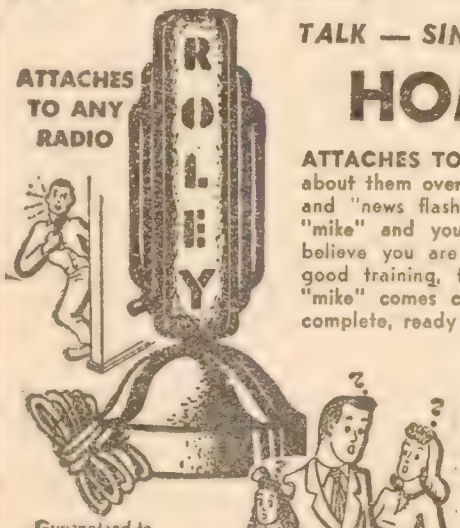

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DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

(Continued From Page 104)

blonde mustache bristling. "He's my prisoner now. I'll take care of him."

They advanced threateningly. Earp cocked both barrels of the shotgun, placed it to his shoulder.

The men in the front row hesitated, staring in fascination at that slowly moving lethal weapon. They shifted positios, backed up and slowly disintegrated; Earp took his prisoner to Tucson for trial.

But Johnny - Behind - the - Deuce broke jail and fled the country; he was never heard of again.

THE END

PROUD KILLERS OF TONTO

(Continued From Page 85)

to its lower bed. Once, perhaps centuries before, that same Tonto Creek had channeled its way higher up on the slope. Cutting through a soft strata of volcanic rock and possibly that gold bearing quartz, it had dropped to the lower level.

Doc Jones was sending his long fingers here and there, exploring the body for the bullet wounds.

"Damfunny!" spat out Doc Jones. "Ain't none of your braggin' about how you killed Lamont will stand up. Nary bullet left a mark in front?

The carved bone handle of the knife protruded from squarely between Luke Lamont's shoulders. There was no other mark of violence that Doc Jones could discover.

Every man there identified the haft of that knife. It was apparent the knife had been thrown instead of stabbed into the heart of Luke Lamont.

Suddenly there was quick movement and cursing. A bearded gunslick who had been in Lamont's hire pushed a smaller man ahead of him crossing the street.

The dark, fear-ridden face of Pasquale, the Mex, showed in the moonlight.

"Here's the gent that done the killin'!" snarled the Lamont gunnie, giving Pasquale a hard shove and sending him to his knees.

"Senor Dave, eet ees for Ramos an' Lolita who have died weeth bad water fever, no? Senor Lamont make it so

I have not the dinero for medicine. I have—"

A sneering laugh came from the Lamont gunslick. He started to holster his gun.

"Keep yore iron outta leather!" rasped Kale Carson, and his six centered on the gunnie's middle. "Drop it an' elevate yore paws high. Then start shaggin' outta Tonto Basin! Roth, frisk him for hide-outs!"

"Yuh!" boomed Abe Roth. "An' Tonto'll see you have all your fella gunslicks trailin' along! Head east to Provo an' you'll maybe find some waterholes!"

"But by hell! You can't run me out for catchin' up a damn' greaser killer!" blustered the gunslick.

"There ain't been no decision as to the killin'" stated Doc Jones flatly. "Best take what's offered, gun slinger! I'm thinkin' there'll be a heap of lynch-minded basinites along in no time at all!"

"You're claimin' this knife is yours, Pasquale?" Doc Jones jerked it clear of the wound that went all the way to the heart. "Take it, you Pasquale, an' bury it where it won't be seen again. Mosey along, pronto!"

By some means word of the killing was beginning to spread. Doc Al Jones looked around at his committee, Abe Roth, Kale Carson and Dave Carr. He included the chubby Joel Bowden and Gus Anderson.

"Includin' myself, makes an even number for a coroner's jury," stated Doc Jones with solemn dignity. Then before any other man could speak up he went on, "Gents, I accept your verdict. Losing his holt on Tonto Basin by the accidental breakin' of his creek flume, we, the coroner's jury finds that Luke Lamont came to his death by stabbin' himself fatally in the heart. That makes it suicide."

Dave Carr glanced around at the faces of the committee. He guessed he wouldn't be hitting the desert again. He turned toward his shack to unpack.

He would see Mary in the morning.

THE END

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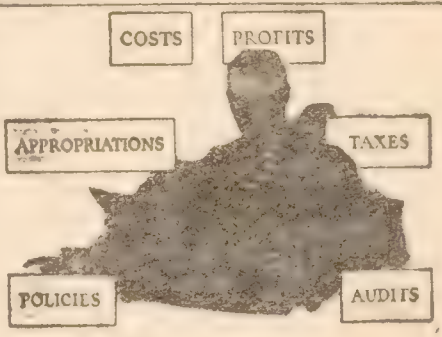

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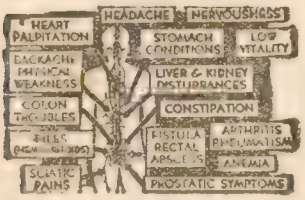

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PAT MORAN — RAILROAD SECTION BOSS

By Rex Whitechurch

THE WESTERN railroads that spread in the shape of a spider's web across the plains and the mountains of the west were difficult to keep safe so that the dangers of travel were minimized. Of course, the more important things were the rails, ties and beds which had to be kept secure above everything else. Section crew were important and well paid. In the hot sun and the inclemency of winter those men toiled, with guns strapped on them and horses tethered close at hand. Whereever they went they resembled more than anything else a crew of gold hunters, with their hammers, shovels, picks and water kegs loaded on their pack mules, and their saddle carbines gleaming in the sun.

Indians were not the sole menace. Vast herds of cattle and buffalo and not infrequently bands of road agents, would appear and prove so hazardous that the section hands who were the guardians of safety in railroad transportation had to be gunfighters, scouts and excellent horsemen. In Nebraska, and in Kansas, buffalo in large droves would suddenly dash out

(Continued On Page 110)

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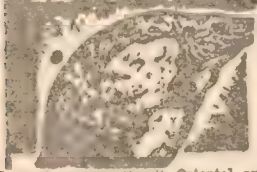

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(Continued From Page 108)

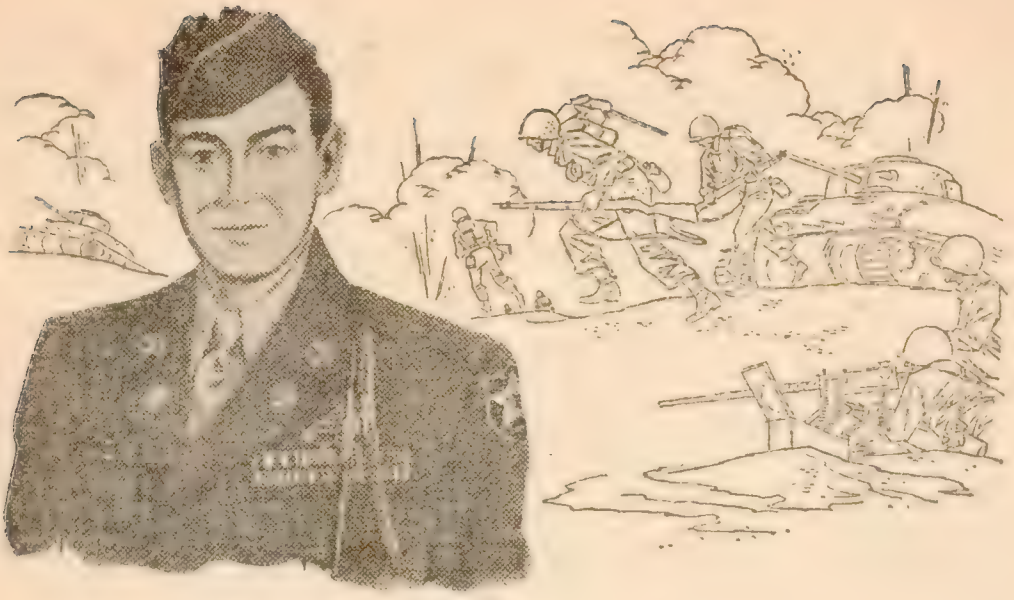
across the rails and stop and demolish trains. Big Pat Moran worked for the Union Pacific and other roads, and was considered a top man by all and sundry. His services came high and he was held in deep regard by his employers. Moran was thirty years old, a huge fisted Irishman who'd fight at the drop of the hat and who usually gave a good account of himself whatever the emergency.

Not many men could be found who were willing to carry heavy rails tamp ties and drive spikes. Usually, the men came from some eastern city. Mexicans were in demand. They made good workers and stood the killing heat better than the average American.

Pat Moran traveled extensively, breaking in crews. On the night of December 23, 1880, a four-car "woodburner" was buried in drifts near Troy, Kansas. Forty seven travelers were aboard. It took Pat and his men twelve hours to dig them out. There was no fuel; the wood supply was exhausted in the tender and the coaches were freezing cold. The crew had been forced to abandon their horses two miles from the scene and struggled through the remaining distance afoot. Pat selected two little girls seven and eleven years old, and carried one under each arm to where a camp had been made and bright fires were burning. Pat went back, and this time his burden was a slender blonde school teacher who rode his shoulders piggy back. Three times Pat fell with her. He set her down and started back to the train again, and this time he found a child with a frozen foot. He carried her to the camp, not knowing she was the blonde's little sister. Three weeks later Pat and the blonde were married, but it didn't last.

THEN THERE was the time when Pat discovered a burning trestle which had been set aflame by drunken cowboys, and he had to take a chance on walking the ties across a deep canyon, so as to reach the heart of the fire. He succeeded, but the train that whistled and charged out of the night at him, was an avalanche of crazy sounds. He saw the head-

(Continued On Page 112)



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(Continued From Page 110)

light which resembled the brilliant and blinding eye of some huge black beast. He kept swinging his lantern and the engineer slammed on the brakes with the front wheels already on the trestle. The bridge gave way and Pat went down with it. He fell into a tree and escaped serious injury.

Near Council Bluffs, with 20 men he saved a fast express from being destroyed by Indians. They made a stockade of the hickory rails and crawled inside. For hours they stood off the attacking savages and killed many of them. But toward evening Pat found his ammunition supply running low, and he knew they were doomed. Four trains had passed through the gulch while the battle raged, with no harm to them. The Indians ceased to be interested in the iron monsters they heard chugging across the mountains and concentrated their entire efforts on the forty men inside the hickory pen.

Lucky for Pat and his crew of dare devils, a troop of cavalry in charge of Captain Leslie Russell, enroute to Council Bluffs from Broken Bow, Nesbraska, heard the bark and rattle of rifle fire and investigated. Sight of the waving flag and uniformed riders and sound of the bugle sent the Indians into a swift retreat.

For this act of valor, Pat Moran was given a medal and a bonus. On September 6th, 1881, Pat and his crew of section hands saved an entire town from being destroyed by fire. The flames broke out in the little frame depot when the heater got too hot and the deaf agent opened the iron door. Coals dropped on the floor and soon the building was an inferno. One by one the false fronts of the business section of McDonald Kansas, a cowtown, caught fire. Pat directed his bucket brigade and held the fire down until help could arrive from the nearby ranches. He rescued valuable express which was stored in the depot, by plunging into the seething mass of red flames.

Another fire was started by hostile savages, and Pat ordered his men to dig deep trenches along the right-of-way so the flames could not stop and destroy the trains. His forty men

(Continued On Page 114)

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DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

(Continued From Page 112)

soon had excavated the long ditch and filled it with water from a nearby stream. Thus four fast express and passenger trains were saved from destruction. Seeing a herd of buffalo rushing toward the tracks, Pat built a fire and the sounds of thundering flames sent the buffalo into a panic of fear and they were turned back, just as a long passenger train went by.

IN 1881, on a February morning, Pat and seven of his crew were riding to work. Suddenly a carbine spoke sharply and the man riding beside the boss dropped out of his saddle.

"Charge!" yelled Pat, although he did not know what he was charging at. With the reins in his teeth and his six guns blazing, the big Irishman led his men through a hail of hot lead, toward the steel rails. Four men facing them gave ground, ran backward. They'd been drawing the spikes out of the ties to wreck the oncoming train which carried a shipment of gold bars. Not only did Pat's crew rout the Newlin gang of desperadoes, but two of the bandits were captured. Again Pat Moran received a bonus and a medal.

They drank and they played just as hard as they worked and fought. At the little town of McDonald, where Pat's dancehall belle flaunted her brunette beauty, Pat made the mistake of being caught by the woman's estranged husband and was shot six times as he tried to escape by a raised window.

They buried the big Irishman, not in Boothill, but in a Chicago cemetry and the casket was carried back through Kansas City on a special train. Yeah, they were a hard riding, a hard fighting, hard working and hard playing crew, those railroad section hands. They took their whiskey straight and their women where they found them. They were excellent horsemen, splendid shots and as courageous as lions....Pat Moran's story appeared often in the newspapers of his day and he was sort of lionized because he'd always come out on top, and the world loves a winner. Much was made by the press of the railroad furnishing a special train to carry his bier.

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If the "Spot Reducer" doesn't do the wonders for you as it has for others, if you don't lose weight and inches where you want to lose it most, if you're not 100% delighted with the results, your money will be returned at once.

A large size jar of Special Formula Body Massage Cream will be included FREE with your order for the "Spot Reducer."

MAIL COUPON NOW!

The "Spot Reducer" Co. Dept. DA7
3 William St., Newark, New Jersey

Send me at once, for $2 cash, check or money order, the "Spot Reducer" and your famous Special Formula Body Massage Cream, postpaid. If I am not 100% satisfied, my money will be refunded.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

Mason's New ZIPPER Shoe

Skyrockets your SALES and PROFITS!

Customers everywhere eager to buy these unique "Zip-On . . . Zip-Off" shoes RIGHT NOW!
Top quality glove-soft leather . . . Mason craftsmanship . . . astonishing Zipper shoes lead record-breaking Mason line of over 200 superb styles of dress, work, sport shoes for men and women, with Leather Jackets, Raincoats, and other fast-selling items. A line that maintains Mason's 44-year reputation for LEADERSHIP.

POWERFUL NATIONAL ADVERTISING

Powerful National Advertising in SATURDAY EVENING POST, ESQUIRE, AMERICAN LEGION . . . scores of other powerful National Magazines . . . paves the way for you.

SALES POTENTIAL TRIPLED

Cash in NOW. Help the people in your territory get highest quality, most comfortable exclusive Feature footwear they can ever buy for the money. Give them exclusive Personal Fitting Service and help yourself to a sweet, steady, ever-growing income!

GET SAMPLE OUTFIT *FREE!*

Sell the great Mason ZIPPER Shoe and hundreds of other newest styles and models! Get Big FREE Sample Outfit! Be first in your territory!

ZIPS ON ZIPS OFF

SELL MASON'S GENUINE RUBBER RAINCOATS

Sells fast. Big profits for you! Guaranteed waterproof in heaviest rainstorms . . . thousands of customers all around you.

MASON'S LEATHER JACKETS

Keep profits rolling in with these soft, pliable, yet tough and warm, long-wearing Leather Jackets of specially dressed hides. Low Price — amazingly liberal commissions for you!

MASON'S MANY ADVANTAGES!

60,000 Pairs of Shoes!

You draw on our stock of 60,000 pairs of fine shoes in over 200 different styles plus immense daily factory-output. What a selection . . . *exact* size and width with perfect fit in the wanted style and color . . . *every* time! More shoes than your customers could find in many stores combined!

EVERY MASON SALESMAN AN EXPERT SHOE FITTER

Learn to fit every customer through Mason simple, accurate, easy-to-learn methods. Mason TRAINS YOU and makes you a Foot Expert and Certified Shoe Fitter. Mason helps you build a Big Money-Making, Permanent, Repeat Shoe Business!

MEN AND WOMEN WELCOME COMFORT OF *Air Cushioned Velvet-Eez*

DON'T DELAY—MAIL TODAY

Show men and women exclusive Air-Cushioned Velvet-Eez shoes that cradle foot on 10,000 tiny air bubbles! Many report they sell on six out of every ten calls!

CLIP and MAIL COUPON NOW!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-77, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

RUSH me your great New Free Sample Outfit. Include your Automatic Selling Plan and send the book 5,000 Salesmen wrote for me. I want to become a Foot Expert and Certified Shoe Expert . . . and start making big money fast. Send everything FREE and Prepaid.

(My own shoe size is.....)

Name .....

Address .....

Town..... State.....

MASON SHOE MANUFACTURING CO.
Dept. M-77 Chippewa Falls, Wis.